

March 26, 2020

Dear Trinity Family:

There's a lovely concept in the Jewish faith called "pikuach nefesh" which, translated from Hebrew, means "saving a life." It teaches that the preservation of human life takes precedence over *any* religious practice or *any* religious law. A faithful person is called to suspend or forego anything in order to save a life.

There's a second idea: a story about the anthropologist Margaret Mead who was asked, years ago, by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones. Instead, Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink, or hunt for food. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal. "A broken femur that has healed," she said, "is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts."

These two ideas, two lessons really, seem relevant in our present moment. Yesterday our governor issued a "stay at home" order for the next two weeks. It begins tomorrow, Friday, March 28, 2020. If we look at it from the anthropological perspective – staying home is an act of civilization. In doing so we are taking the time, making the sacrifices, to help each other through illness and crisis by better pacing the spread of the virus so our health care system can keep up with hospital care and ICU services. By staying home we're not leaving anyone behind – we are taking the time to stay with those who fall and making more possible the binding up of their wounds and their tending through recovery.

If we consider quarantine from the perspective of "pikuach nefesh," staying home is also a ministry. Preserving the lives of other people is, in both the Jewish and Christian faiths, an act of the highest spiritual order. By doing our part we contribute to the protection, healing, and safety both for ourselves and for other people. There is something soothing to me about understanding self-quarantines and "sheltering in place" as ministry.

What is Helping Me Cope

As I mentioned last week, because this time is so fraught, and we're all struggling in some way or another, each week I'll tell you what is helping me deal in the hopes that it might offer something to you, too.

These days I pluck along with tending family and work, and, like so many of you, I sit in front of screens watching people in Hollywood Squares boxes. I talk a lot on the phone. During the day I will sometimes feel anxious, a little cloud of anxiety will settle in around me, and I begin to worry. There's so much to worry about, and such a big cloud of "unknown" looming over us. I came across a fantastic article in the Harvard Business Review entitled, "That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief." And I realized that some of my anxiety is actually grief. "The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us," the article professes, "and we're grieving. Collectively." When I hit these clouds of anxiety and grief, I stop, take a breath, and invite God to be with me, to surround and comfort me, to extend the Peace that is only God's to impart. I think the worst thing we can do in those moments is to bat the feeling aside and deny it. "Welcome grief." "Welcome fear." "Welcome worry." And then..... "I'm here, God." "Bless me." "Send me your Peace."

I have also become a devotee of Tara Brach. She was recommended by someone whose opinion I deeply trust. Brach has developed a four-step RAIN meditation that is helping me manage anxiety and improve my capacity for self-care. The steps of RAIN (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture) help create a clearing in the dense forest of our lives by awakening mindfulness and compassion, applying them to the places where we are stuck, and untangling emotional suffering. A guided meditation on the practice of RAIN is here:

<https://www.tarabrach.com/meditation-practice-rain/>

I've also been contemplating the whole idea of coping itself. My daughter has some physical and learning disabilities and growing up was hard for her – both academically and socially. Thankfully, she has a soaring and resilient spirit, and from a young age she evolved a coping skill in which she would remind herself that she could get through a momentary hardship or heartbreak because she had something to look forward to. And she would put great effort into helping to organize events, trips, gatherings, celebrations, and treats to which she could look forward. She carried this coping tool with her to college. Part of the hardship of coronavirus, for her, has been the taking away of this coping mechanism. All of the “prizes” my daughter has set up for herself to help her weather anxiety and hardship and challenge have been cancelled, or suspended, or postponed. Again, in the face of a virus that is killing people across the globe, a cancelled trip or the tenuous nature of a much-coveted summer job is a small thing. But the bigger concern is the loss of a coping mechanism, especially amidst our current circumstances of heightened worry, fear, and anxiety.

I am wondering – how do any of us cope with everyday worries, anxieties and unknowns – and has our altered reality of stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and sheltering-in-place compromise some of our regular coping mechanisms? Are there alternatives that can replace our ways of coping that are out of our current reach?

Blessing

In the end, as always, we have God. We have each other, brothers and sisters in Christ. So, in blessing, I offer this prayer for courage, from “To Bless the Space Between Us” by John O’Donohue.

When the light around you lessens
And your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn
Cold as a stone inside,

When you find yourself bereft
Of any belief in yourself
And all you unknowingly
Leaned on has fallen,

When one voice commands
Your whole heart,
And it is raven dark,

Steady yourself and see
That it is your own thinking
That darkens your world,

Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light,

Know that you are not alone
And that this darkness has purpose;
Gradually it will school your eyes
To find the one gift your life requires
Hidden within this night-corner.

Invoke the learning
Of every suffering
You have suffered.

Close your eyes.
Gather all the kindling
About your heart
To create one spark.
That is all you need
To nourish the flame
That will cleanse the dark
Of its weight of festered fear.

A new confidence will come alive
To urge you toward higher ground
Where your imagination
Will learn to engage difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold!

May God's Peace be yours, this day and always.