

Pandemic holds enriching potential
Realizing how little we control brings relief from the burden of producing results

Doug Koop

Covid-19 is complicating life for just about everyone these days, rendering the ordinary affairs of life more difficult and serving as a reminder of the many privileges we typically enjoy and all-too-easily take for granted. I am among the privileged.

Very little of my professional work can be done from home. As a hospital-based Spiritual Health Practitioner, my job is to be present with people during upsetting times; to come alongside them as they work to come to terms with changing circumstances. It's often very sad.

In today's troubling times, everyone—whether colleague, neighbour, relative, friend or stranger—has a story to tell, a situation to process, fears to face, and hopes to nurture. Collectively we are discomfited to realize that the information and practices that work well for today are apt to be different tomorrow. Possibilities for further disruption are downright palpable and the dangerous unknown looms like a threatening cloud.

We wonder who or what can be trusted? We're concerned that some innocent act of our own might accelerate contagion? At the very least, the times are unsettling.

Although the dynamics of navigating these rapid changes are similar for all, no individual's story is quite the same as another. My unique circumstances compelled me to stay home two days this week, and I am tremendously grateful for an understanding employer who is offering as much flexibility as the workplace can allow. For now, at any rate, I can still get paid. I try not to take this for granted.

Blessed and fragile

At home I employ a small team to provide care services for my wife, who lives with disabilities stemming from two decades of Multiple Sclerosis. She needs this level of support, and thanks to the province's family managed home care program we've been able to hire a trusty crew.

Last weekend I circulated a letter to the team outlining the viral protection measures we were taking to maximize safety in the home, offered a temporary dollar-an-hour raise, and urged anyone experiencing symptoms to not come in, to look after themselves first.

As it happened, two of three regularly scheduled caregivers felt unwell and chose to self-isolate rather than risk spreading germs. Although our team has some roster depth, I was only able to arrange coverage for one of the three days affected by staff illness this week. I was needed more at home than at work.

So far this is working out just fine. We are comfortable where we live, and the sudden gift of extra time to simply be home is not unwelcome. In fact, it's rather nice. The dog gets more attention; neglected books are being read; an article is getting written; the house is clean and the kitchen turns out decent fare. We're blessed.

But I am not naive enough to expect the novel bliss of this disruptive season to last for very long. We may not be able to remain as comfortable as we are without considerable effort or expense. My workplace may not always be so accommodating. Nor may the workplace I manage be able to be as flexible.

Things very well could fall apart. For many, they already have.

Not afraid

Strangely, the dread potentials of this disease-ridden season are not particularly frightening. My heart doesn't race when I consider them, nor do they frolic in my thoughts like an annoying squirrel skittering in the attic.

Rather, now is when the notion of recognizing sacredness in the ordinary affairs of life makes perfect sense. Now is the time to be grateful for what we have, and to acknowledge the transitory nature of everything in our experience, including our very lives.

Our personal health and material wellbeing is always more fragile than we know. In our era we depend on just-in-time delivery schedules, cross-border transportation arrangements, globally-linked supply chains, and all kinds of digital connections. When any of these systems go haywire—and they certainly can—much of what we take for granted can disappear.

In the hospital I regularly accompany people as they weather tremendous stresses affecting both body and spirit. Often they discover unexpected strength in the process, learning to accept situations and experiencing precious moments of insight and connection that wouldn't occur if their vulnerability were not laid bare.

We need to know that it is possible to be well even when the world is turned upside down.

The human spirit is resilient, especially when it faces our deepest fears and releases our customary sense of responsibility for outcomes beyond our sphere of control. To recognize the limitations of our striving is the kind of humility that enables us to be fully aware of how small we are in the vast scheme of the universe, and also to remain confident that our lives matter and our efforts can make a positive difference.

Our deepest selves yearn to mend the world, even if we can't fix the whole thing. Each of us has but a small part.

Our job—everyone's job—is to do the right thing in any given moment; to respond with kindness in the situations we encounter; to help where we can; to live with a profound sense of gratitude; to encourage healthy practices; to practice healthy living; to attend to our inner selves with as much honesty as we can muster.

None of us will solve all the problems we face, but this way of responding to harsh realities is both soul satisfying and life enriching. It makes the world a better place.

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