

Reflection/Prayertime #1

March 3, 2020

Good afternoon and thank you for joining me and the VOA ministers and Ken Burke, my Compassion Committee Co-Chair (or Co-Pilot as I like to refer to him) for our reflection and prayer together. To help with expectations, I want to recognize that many of you come from a variety of faith or religious traditions or perhaps no tradition - that we may bring differing expectations to what this time together will involve, and I will tell you that the important thing is that we have come together to share in this unchosen time in our history. So bear with us if you were expecting something different - it might happen next week. My intent is to support you all.

I first want to give a shout out of appreciation to the medical and health services staff at VOA Mid-States and to their professional colleagues across the country and the world - we are keenly aware of the value of your skills and knowledge and of your enduring commitment. And we support you with all that we have and can do, which is why I'm working from home today. And to all of you who are essentially keeping the services provided at a difficult time of evolving protocols and competing demands and client and coworker and your own family stress, especially in our residential programs, a huge thank you and shout out for all that you are doing. I see you and have walked in your shoes as managing our Louisville family shelter for 25 years through ice storms and windstorms and 16 inch snows before becoming chaplain. Trust me, no one wants me to ever cook again for 75 people. I realize that this crisis is different.

As I think about the past few weeks, it has been absolutely dizzying and we've been thrown so off-kilter. It's reminded me of a time many years ago when my husband's singing group was invited to perform at a black gospel music association on the Belle of Louisville and while we were on the boat in the middle of the Ohio river, I suddenly smelled smoke. I remember trying to make sense of it, like "I'm on a steamboat - does steam smell like smoke? And suddenly a table 3 tables away from me was on fire from a cigarette that didn't get fully extinguished. Soon the side of the boat was on fire.

As everyone noticed the fire, there was a moment where we all stepped back from it and I can still in my memory feel the kinesthetic movement of many people, maybe 100-200, stepping to the other side of the boat. I can remember the huge tilt in the boat as it swayed and how unnerving it felt. I remember the anxiety in the pit of my stomach as I quickly assessed my stamina and swimming abilities - good enough in a pool, grossly inadequate in the middle of the Ohio River.

I read somewhere that we humans value control above all our other capacities and I'll say more about this in a future reflection, but for now I'll just say that we as human beings have a great need for predictability and control and our worst nightmare is unpredictability and lack of control for a sustained season. Where we are now is the absolute poster child for lack of control. And here we are with with social distancing going on for another month.

So how do we handle this time of fear and anxiety? Dr Fred Rogers' mother used to say in times of fear look to the helpers - that someone is always stepping in. On that day of being on a burning boat in the middle of the river, I saw my sweet husband calmly grab a life jacket to hand me and start handing them out to the elderly people on the boat and put on one himself. I said to him that I was so anxious I was having trouble breathing and he kindly pointed out to me that I had in my haste and disorientation put my head through the lifejacket armhole. I readjusted it and

breathed and started helping him hand out more lifejackets, even in my own fear. It helps to take a breath and gather wits and re-orient to the situation in a crisis. I also felt the God's presence with me.

That day I saw the drummer in my husband's band jump into immediate action with a fire extinguisher, putting the fire out after a few minutes and ensuring safety for all of us. Someone commented that he should become a firefighter. He went on to study emergency medicine at the technical school and worked as an EMT. I'm grateful to him that in that moment he found his leadership path and gift of quick response. We would never have chosen this, but some of us will discover new gifts and our own leadership path in these coming days.

David Brooks wrote an article in the New York Times this week that said:

It can all seem so meaningless. Some random biological mutation sweeps across the globe, murdering thousands, lacerating families and pulverizing dreams. Life and death can seem completely arbitrary. Religions and philosophies can seem like cruel jokes. The only thing that matters is survival. Without the inspiration of a higher meaning, selfishness takes over.

This mind-set is the temptation of the hour – but of course it's wrong. We'll look back on this as one of the most meaningful periods of our lives.

Viktor Frankl, writing from the madness of the Holocaust, reminded us that we don't get to choose our difficulties, but we do have the freedom to select our responses. Meaning, he argued, comes from three things: the work we offer in times of crisis, the love we give, and our ability to display courage in the face of suffering. The menace may be subhuman or superhuman, but we all have the option of asserting our own dignity, even to the end.

I'd add one other source of meaning. It's the story we tell about this moment. It's the way we tie our moment of suffering to a larger narrative of redemption. It's the way we then go out and stubbornly live out that story. We can't see the invisible plague, but we see each other helping.

We are all assigned the task of confronting our own fear. I don't know about you, but I've had a pit of fear in my stomach since this started that hasn't gone away. But gradually you discover that you have the resources to cope as you fight the fear with conversation and direct action. (And I would add with social distancing the best that you can do). A stronger self emerges out of the death throes of the anxiety.

Suffering can be redemptive. We learn more about ourselves in these hard periods. The differences between people don't seem as acute on the gurneys of the E.R. (And not everyone ends up on the gurney and I'll share more about that next week. With all on the news, it helps to remember that).

So, yes, this is a meaningful moment. And it is this very meaning that will inspire us and hold us together as things get worse. In situations like this, meaning is a vital medication for the soul.

Other medication for the soul can include Scripture and prayer and I invite you to listen for a word from God if you'd like:

In his letter to the Philippians in Philippians 4:4-7 it says, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. We can have reasonableness and the peace of God passing understanding.

PRAYER IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

May we who are merely inconvenienced Remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors Remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home Remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close Remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips Remember those that have no place to go. May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market Remember those who have no margin at all. May we who settle in for a quarantine at home Remember those who have no home.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each

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