

“Our Finest Hour: Love Wisdom from the World’s Religions”

March 22, 2020

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Like you, I have been spending a lot of time at home lately. When I do go out, I bundle my errands to limit my trips. This week, one of my trips brought me to the large post office in Woburn.

It was a strange experience. Driving through the retail corridor of Washington Street, there were hardly any cars on the road. When I got to the post office, I was one of only three customers. I recalled a past visit there, right before Christmas. It was hard to find a parking spot, every station had someone on duty and still the line through the massive lobby was long.

Waiting my turn, a safe six feet from the person in front of me, I saw something stranger still. The customer at the counter had an African Violet. Was she planning to mail the African Violet? I thought. If so, where was the box? Did I miss some sort of “houseplant evacuation plan” in the last missive from the Governor?

Things became more clear when the clerk returned to the counter. Wearing latex gloves, he carried a plastic glass of water. Tenderly, he watered the African Violet. Once it was well-hydrated, the woman brought it to a central counter in the lobby where she picked up another African Violet. Through their conversation, I learned that the customer was concerned about the violets’ welfare and that a postal employee named Linda usually takes care of them, but she has been off for awhile. Through the customer’s advocacy, the African Violets were saved.

Watching this exchange, my first thought was “In the midst of everything, she is worried about an African Violet?” But then I heard this question again as a statement: “In the midst of everything, she is worried about an African Violet.”

Perhaps her intervention at the post office would have happened, no matter what. But this defense of living things seemed emblematic of the larger moment we are living through.

Due to the need to practice “compassionate spacing” to prevent spread of COVID-19, everyday lives have been upside down for about two weeks. It is unclear when it will be safe for us to gather in community in person again. And governments are

demanding that we do this and most of us are freely following these guidelines for one simple reason: regardless of our individual circumstances, each one of us must act to care for the collective.

While we know this from the perspective of epidemiology, I have been thinking about individuals acting to protect the community in a spiritual way. I am grateful to [Gretchen Schmelzer](#)¹ who gave me language to articulate what I was feeling. She writes:

When the Apollo 13 oxygen tank failed and the lunar module was in danger of not returning to earth, Gene Kranz, the lead flight director overheard people saying that this could be the worst disaster NASA had ever experienced—to which he is rumored to have responded, “With all due respect, I believe this is going to be our finest hour.”

She continues:

Imagine if we could make our response to this crisis our finest hour. Imagine if a year or two from now we looked back on this and told the stories of how we came together as a team in our community, in our state, in our nation and across the world. Your contribution to the finest hour may seem small, invisible, inconsequential—but every small act...will add up exponentially. These acts can and will save lives. The Apollo 13 crew made it their finest hour by letting go of the word “I” and embracing the word “we.” And that’s the task required of us...

Schmelzer’s observation made me think about World War II, about how communities saved and gathered scrap metal and children harvested milkweed, all raw materials for the production of goods needed by the troops. Families planted victory gardens, allowing the government to send crops to members of the armed forces and war-torn regions overseas. While I am sure greed and cynicism were also at work then – we are talking about human beings after all – I have always admired what sounds like a time of great national unity and collective vision. For those born in my generation and after, these endeavors sound at best “quaint” and at worst “unimaginable.” And in our current time of vicious political rancor, such gestures of unity seem mythic.

¹ <http://gretchenschmelzer.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/can-we-make-this-our-finest-hour>

Yet, here we are. As we limit our contact with others, we do this to protect ourselves and to protect one another. We do this in service to the needs of the ill and the elderly. And we do this, to use an old phrase, “without regard to persons.” We are caring for our grandmother and the co-worker we cannot stand. We are protecting our best friend and the candidates we did not vote for. And all their rabid supporters. Through our collective action, we are loving our neighbor as ourselves. We are acting as if the lives of the stranger matter.

We are not gathering metal in this time but we are volunteering to make facemasks on our sewing machines. We are offering to run errands for those who are self-isolating, by order or by choice. We are volunteering money for the suddenly jobless. Here at WUS, in our on-going survey of members and friends, I have been moved to learn how many want to contribute to the support and healing of others. I already knew this about you but hearing so many offers, grounded not in “I” but “we,” is inspiring.

Life is now divided in “BC” and “AD” – “before Covid” and “after disease.” Before Covid, we had planned today’s service as one that dwelled on the wisdom of the world religions. Now that we are “AD,” we recognized that one thing most ancient faiths command us to do is to tend to the fragile and the foreign with love. Thus, we became inspired to turn to leaders from diverse traditions for guidance as we make this time “our finest hour.” Together, these readings will serve as an extended reflection and meditation.

One perspective, with a decidedly spiritual and humbling message, comes to us from Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber. In her book “Accidental Saints,” she reminds us that “you are not the blessing.” She writes:

While we as people of God are certainly called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, that whole “we’re blessed to be a blessing” thing can still be kind of dangerous...[S]eeing myself as the blessing can pretty easily obscure the way in which I am actually part of the problem and can hide the ways in which I too am poor and needing care. Seeing myself or my church or my denomination as “the blessing” - like so many mission trips to help “those less fortunate than ourselves” - can easily descend into a blend of benevolence and paternalism. We can start to see the poor as

supporting characters in a big story about how noble, selfless, and helpful we are.

...I looked harder at Matthew 25 and realized that if Jesus said "I was hungry and you fed me," then Christ's presence is not embodied in those who feed the hungry...but Christ's presence is in the hungry being fed....And to be clear, Christ does not come to us as the poor and hungry. Because, as anyone for whom the poor are not an abstraction but actual flesh-and-blood people knows, the poor and hungry and imprisoned are not a romantic special class of Christ-like people...We all are equally as sinful and saintly as the other. No, Christ comes to us in the needs of the poor and hungry, needs that are met by another so that the gleaming redemption of God might be known.²

This is a sacred time. Though our individual and collective actions are secular, non-partisan and civically ordained, together they are a sacrament, a complex ritual of setting aside "I" for "we," for loving our neighbor as ourselves. As Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us, this does not make any of us special. Yet each life nurtured, each life protected, each life saved; there dwells the holy.