

Much is Not Normal
May 2020

In the April 12, 2020 Sunday Review section of the *New York Times*, Ross Douthout stated, in writing of the pandemic, that “there is a religious duty to interpret the present moment, not just seek to endure it or escape.” Examination and interpretation may result in greater uncertainty, but they are critical necessities. “If we simply think to pass through all this in hasty expectation of a return to normal, perhaps we are missing the fundamental point of the exercise.”

I have been asking “Why this?” for many weeks, with no answers, not even uncertain ones. No feeble thought or gauzy answer offers that level of certainty from which I normally draw comfort. The stealth of COVID-19, the subsequent quarantine, and—nearly unfathomable to imagine—the *politicizing* of the pandemic is eluding the scientists, doctors, critical medical staff, and caring and responsible leaders. Of course, a pandemic is a natural and omni-potential phenomenon, what we as simple humans must accept. What drains us, experts and non-, is that COVID-19 has the upper hand. It honors no boundaries. It fits into no pattern. Its unpredictability translates to unsettling, frightening uncertainty. In the now. In the future.

Those who are fighting the battle against COVID-19—and oh, they are to be honored—have journeyed far and have carried us away from what we pine for: Normal. The situation is frighteningly paradoxical. Normal, as we know it, is a thing of the past. A new normal will emerge, but it will not be our normal. Until it is.

I realize that I must trust the good and true experts with my future. Yet, it is my responsibility to seek a “fundamental point” of the exercise, even if the point stems from my individual and ever-so-wobbly certainty. It would be negligent of me to disregard what I have learned during these early months of the pandemic, which has yet to peak, I am told, where I reside.

What I have learned may be assumed by others to be petty and inconsequential, but it is my knowledge, and it might beg to be part of a larger, perhaps more perceptive, conversation. It is this: that I miss the little things, the things that ground me and connect me to something larger and familiar. In missing them, I am struck by their value.

I miss looking into a friend’s eyes without the distortion, the flatness of a technical, online connection.

I miss emitting hearty laughter, the kind that comes from the center of my being. My present laughter is tentative, weak. It is muted by the omni-present concern for those in the midst of the battle against the disease, by grief for those who have lost the battle.

I miss the assurance that those who are dying are surrounded by loved ones. I miss that the loved ones are assured ceremonies and rituals of closure.

I miss the richness of innocent, smile-provoking eavesdropping. How it connects us, gently, subtly, humorously, mock-shockingly, to memories and to sudden-new thoughts and emotions.

I miss returning a book loaned by a friend, it cradled in my arms, nestled among books I'm excited for her to read. She takes the books, places them on the sofa and picks up a stack for me to read, which includes the book I previously had loaned to her.

I miss touching—without going on germ alert—lovely surfaces, such as the smooth wooden railing that pulls me to our town's second story bookstore. Such as a friend's new coat, crisp-cold in the spring's morning air, as we hug.

I miss trusting others as more than—as not!—COVID-19 carriers.

I miss waking up and smiling.

I miss hugs.

In missing the little things, I am reminded that life grows stale if I wallow in the negative swamp, searching for the return to normal. Instead, I do what is difficult. I focus on lessons learned.

I have learned after all these years of battling that I am okay with myself. The *Myself* that has been formed through loving, caring relationships.

I have learned that when I love someone, I love all of that person. Little boxes of people on my computer screen do little for me. I must see arms flailing, hands gesticulating, weight shifting, toes tapping. How else can I fully grasp what my friend is saying?

I have learned that I love the smell of a library or bookstore, heavy with the scent of binding and pages. I love the massive and weighty quiet, generated by dozens of souls bent over print pages, absorbing what words convey. I love the energy that the stacks of books, their wisdom and stories, packed under pressure, emit. I have learned that my health depends on these places.

I have re-learned to read. I have discarded the skimming, the counting of pages to determine a completion date, the racing to the finish so that I can dutifully begin another book. I read now as I did as a child. I slow down, breathe, fall mentally into the book, feel as if I am as well falling into it. I read as if the rest of the world has slowed, dissolved. I become lost, for as long as I want, the book's reality my reality. No clock is ticking.

I have re-learned that daily walking is my necessity. While walking, I dream, I solve, I pray, I hope, I listen, I absorb. I may even rejoice in what I have, in what I see and smell.

I have re-learned that simultaneously, I comfortably embrace aloneness just as I cherish the presence of my family and my friends. And clumps of people.

Beyond the valued lost items and the lessons learned, though, is a more critical “fundamental point”. When we love in aloneness, in quarantine and by social distancing, we keep bumping into ourselves. Certainly, we love ourselves and don't want to be cruel in any way to that reflection that is us. As a result of these reflections brought about by Self-collision, we come to realize that our Self is us, but it is also like another. Like a neighbor. It is good to love our

neighbor as our Self. If we focus on how we and those around us feel in aloneness, it can't be that hard, can it? To show and share compassion, empathy, honest communication? To offer an apology, a smile, a thank you, words of forgiveness? To reach out with a giving hand to all those with value, which is everyone?

I don't know people well enough. I don't know well enough those who are different from me. I say I understand and empathize, but I really don't know poverty, homelessness, hunger, unemployment, dying, difference. I haven't a clue. But if I have learned one ultimate lesson from this pandemic, it is that, through my comfortable aloneness and my yearning for the real presence of others, I can keep trying. It's all I can presently do. My new normal may be one that invites overcorrecting. Never useful on the highway at great speed, it may be useful in my life. Fiercer hugs, keener listening, more meaningful conversation, wider openness, stronger desire to embrace diversity and difference, ever-loving acceptance, service to those in need. That's it. I think.