

## Tragic Optimism

### On Coronavirus Lockdown? Look for Meaning, Not Happiness



Mark 1:30 "Now Simon (Peter's) mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and (the disciples) told (Jesus) about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her . . . And (Jesus) cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons;"

From the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry there were instances of healing and restoration, a ministry the Christian Church continued thereafter. Now we are in the midst of this tragic coronavirus pandemic that has not just threatened the physical health of millions of people across the globe, but also wreaked havoc on the emotional and mental well-being of people all around us. Feelings of anxiety, helplessness and grief continue to escalate as we as a people face an uncertain future --- and almost every one of us, I suspect, has been touched by the death from this disease of someone we've loved. A national poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found

that nearly half of all Americans feel that the coronavirus has negatively affected their mental health. Which raises the question: Is there anything that we can do to cope with the emotional fallout of this troubling and challenging time of ours?

Now how people respond to adversity varies from group to group. Academic research in the psychology of resilience works to understand why some people are broken by crises, while others emerge from stressful situations even stronger than before. Many of those studies upend some common ideas that our culture carries about trauma and well-being. When researchers and clinicians look at who copes well in crisis and even grows through it, it's interestingly not those who focus on pursuing happiness to feel better, that succeed; it's those who focus on pursuing meaning, those who cultivate an attitude of what is called "tragic optimism."

The term "tragic optimism" was coined by Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and a psychiatrist from Vienna. Tragic optimism is the ability to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite its inescapable pain, loss and suffering. So how do we do that?

To understand how tragic optimism might serve us during this pandemic, it may help us to recall how America responded to the September 11th terrorist attacks. People across the country

reported increased feelings of fear, anxiety and hopelessness then. Those emotions were more debilitating for some than for others. And to learn why, a group of researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studied the well-being of young adults in the weeks after the attacks. None of those students studied had actually lost loved ones on September 11th, but like the population at large, they reported feeling distressed. And yet, some of them were less likely to become depressed than others. Why? What set those resilient students apart, the study reported, was their ability to find the good, to find meaning in their pain and suffering. Unlike the less resilient students, the resilient reported experiencing more positive emotions in the midst of their suffering, feelings like love and gratitude and faith.

That doesn't mean they were Pollyannas. They did not deny the tragedy of what happened. In fact, they reported the same levels of sadness and stress as less resilient people. Indeed, the resilient had intensely negative reactions to the situation. They experienced the despair and stress, and they acknowledged the horror of what was happening and suffered as a result. The resilient acknowledged and felt the trauma as much as others. They didn't ignore it, or white-wash it. Yet even in the darkest of places, those resilient students saw glimmers of light, and this ultimately sustained them, as I believe it will sustain us.

But even more than helping them cope, adopting the spirit of tragic optimism enables people to actually grow emotionally through an adversity. For a long time now many psychologists embraced a victim narrative about trauma, believing that severe stress causes long-lasting and perhaps irreparable damage to one's psyche and health. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association added post-traumatic stress disorder to the DSM (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), and since then, PTSD has received a lot of attention in the media and among ordinary individuals trying to understand what happens to people in the wake of tragic life events.

Yet psychologists readily acknowledge that only a small percentage of people develop the full-blown disorder, while on average, anywhere from one half to two-thirds of trauma survivors exhibit what's known as "post-traumatic growth," not disorder. After a crisis, most people acquire a newfound sense of purpose, develop deeper relationships with others, have a greater appreciation of life and report other benefits. That's what I want for us.

Still it's not the adversity itself that leads to growth. It's how people respond to it. How we respond to adversity determines whether we will grow or not afterwards. According to the psychologists at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the psychologists who coined the term "post-traumatic

growth" in the 1990s, the people who grow after a crisis spend a lot of time trying to make sense of what happened and understanding how it changed them. That's why a lot of people draw closer to their immediate family or friends after a crisis. That's why a lot of people return to church after crises, as a place where people struggle together to make sense of a disaster. And sure enough, surveys show increased religious attendance and participation last year in the midst of this pandemic, despite the obstacles and Covid restrictions. In other words, people search for and find positive meaning in community, in being gathered together, even virtually, which is why we mustn't isolate ourselves in this pandemic, and why we need to check in on those who are home alone.

In modern psychological research, this positive growth is known, a bit unfortunately, as "benefit finding," "the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive." Think for a moment about how the early followers of Jesus responded to his crucifixion, finding meaning in that tragedy that changed the world! Of course, some people are naturally more hopeful than others. But the success of psychological interventions, like meaning-centered psychotherapy – developed at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center to help terminal patients cope with death –

reveals that even the most despairing individuals have the capacity to find meaning in a crisis.

It may seem inappropriate to call on people to seek the good in a crisis of this magnitude, but in study after study of tragedy and disaster, that's what resilient people do. In a study of over a 1,000 people, 58 percent of respondents reported finding positive meaning in the wake of the September 11th attacks, such as a greater appreciation of life or a deeper sense of spirituality, or the importance of community and public service. Other research shows that benefit finders grow not only psychologically, but also their actual physical health improves. That's right. Heart attack survivors, for example, who found meaning in the weeks after their crisis, were eight years later, more likely to still be alive and in better health than those who didn't find meaning in their attacks.

This doesn't mean that people should endure adversities with a smiling face. I am not promoting "Happy, Sappy Christianity" here. In fact, tragic optimism is not the same thing as happiness. In our American culture, when people are feeling depressed or anxious, we too often advise them to do what makes them happy. Much of the pandemic-related mental-health advice channels that message, encouraging people to distract themselves from bad news and difficult feelings, to limit their time on social media, to look away, to exercise and

to avoid focusing on the realities of this tragedy. But if the goal is coping, if the goal is resiliency, happiness does not penetrate into the psyche nearly as deeply as finding meaning does. When people do things that make them happy, like playing games or sleeping in, they feel better for a while – but those feelings fade fast according to research by the University of Ottawa and the University of Rochester.

When people search for meaning, though, they often do not feel happy. The things that make our lives meaningful, like volunteering or working with charities or religion, are often stressful and require effort. But months later, the meaning seekers not only reported fewer negative moods, but also felt more “enriched,” more “inspired” and “part of something greater than themselves.” At St. John’s in Bridgeport, where I last served, we hosted a weekly Tuesday Night Community Supper for the homeless and the poor, about 100 raggedy and tragic people came for the meal each week. It was not necessarily a pleasant experience. The volunteers, though, were a dedicated group who repeatedly told me that they got more out of volunteering than they felt they gave. Their lives were ‘enriched,’ they found meaning, and they as a group were dedicated to this effort, come hell or high-water.

Now as this pandemic has gone for months and months, I see more and more people embracing meaning during this crisis,

organizing food drives, running errands for housebound and immuno-compromised friends, giving blood, checking in on neighbors, making meals for the poor, volunteering at the Food Bank. Others are rallying around struggling small businesses with "virtual tip jars" or ordering take-out from local restaurants more. Many companies and businesses, nationally and locally, are offering their services for free. It is in times of crises like these that we most often see the best in people coming out. I've noticed people saying they are experiencing deeper connections to others in this time of pandemic – feeling, for instance, more grateful for their caregivers, for their teachers, for essential workers who simply stock the shelves, and of course, for our health care professionals among us, people who used to go generally unnoticed and unappreciated. But think of all those red hearts posted along the road by the hospital. This time certainly won't be remembered as a happy period in the history of our nation, but it may be remembered as a time of redemptive meaning and hope.

Does any of this mean the pandemic is a good thing? Of course not. It would be far better had the pandemic never occurred. But that's not the world we live in. Life is difficult and full of sorrows. As much as we might wish, none of us can avoid suffering and pain. I am reminded of the old aphorism that we are not responsible for what tragedies might befall us in



life, but that we are responsible for how we choose to respond to them. That's why it's important to learn to suffer well, with tragic optimism, by together pursuing meaning, and not seeking only after fleeting sense of happiness. AMEN.