

Chaplaincy Innovation Lab Town Hall Meeting - March 17, 2020

I have been reflecting on what it means as a healthcare chaplain and educator, to isolate indoors away from others in response to the Covid-19 virus and crisis. To stay indoors and keep “social distance” from people is counterintuitive to my professional role as a hospital chaplain. It is also contrary to what I know I need for myself in times of crisis, and that is human connection, community, or simply a hand to hold. It is challenging to think about being distant from those struggling with illness, pain, and suffering, while also standing to my role as a chaplain to “show up” and be present, “...I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me...” (Matthew 25:36, NIV)

Being a compassionate listening presence to others is foundational for my work as an interfaith chaplain. The Qur’an describes the Divine as the Most Compassionate One. The Arabic word (*Rahma*) that translates to compassion, also means and is connected to the word community (*Umma*), and the mother’s womb (*Rahm*). The image of the Divine’s abundance of compassion for all of humanity as one community, and the image of a mother’s womb as a compassionate space of love and care, collectively make-up the theological foundation for my ministry practice. The image of hiddenness and protection within the womb is especially helpful as the need for human separation to keep our communities safe during this health crisis is paramount.

Compassionate care for those who are sick and vulnerable calls on my ethical role as a chaplain to help keep people safe by not adding additional harm or injury, and to remove any potential harm. My ethical and spiritual values as a chaplain require me to advocate for the weak and vulnerable, respond to those who are suffering, uphold human dignity, and not harm or oppress. To mitigate potential harm to others from the Covid-19 virus by practicing degrees of human distancing is necessary at this time. This reminder and reframe is helpful.

Recreating our lives, shifting professional roles, and restructuring family life to create safety from the virus is needed. However, these changes have caused losses and layers of grief. Losses such as routines, human touch, finances, assurance, and time engaged in sacred rituals with our faith communities in houses of worship. We have lost confidence in our bodies to be healthy, and trust that other people’s bodies are safe to be near. What perhaps have we gained? Innovative ways to communicate and connect with others; dwelling together with family/loved ones for extended periods; new ways of thinking about social isolation and human dislocation; opportunities to create meaningful spaces for people that can meet their human, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs.

As we make adjustments and gain a new understanding of the Covid-19 health crisis, I hope that we create safe and compassionate spaces to dwell, share, and feel together. While staying inside to keep ourselves and others healthy, I hope we have meaningful experiences and conversations, feel loved, and cared for, laugh, cry, and have moments of joy.

Chaplain Tahara Akmal, MA, BCC, ACPE Certified Educator
Clinical Pastoral Education Manager
MedStar Washington Hospital Center
tahara.akmal@medstar.net