Facing the Moral Anguish of the Pandemic

Unprecedented. Overwhelming. Uncertain. The particulars and scope of the Covid-19 pandemic are without comparison. And no, this is not what war is like. In war, you have comrades, you have authority and order, you have a mission to accomplish – this pandemic has exposed the absence of all of this.

But we do have other frameworks to consider, because this is what trauma is like. Most of us think of trauma on a personal scale, as in something terrible that happens in a matter of moments like a car accident or a sexual assault. Trauma such as this is an acute event that changes the course of our lives and how we live it. But trauma is also like systemic subjugation, whether class-, or caste-, or race-based, in which whole groups are collectively and persistently targeted, in some cases for generations. Trauma like this is a social or even environmental reality, not just a personal one.

Some traumas have moral dimensions. The terminology of “moral injury” is now being discussed in many spaces along with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to describe and respond to severe traumas. What we are facing currently has deep moral dimensions unlike anything we’ve seen. We are facing the prospect of death, loss of material and structural stability, and loss of community. Routines that were once mundane are now subjected to intense cost/benefit analyses. How much do I need milk?

The scope and scale of this pandemic’s terror is so pervasive, so total, that we’ve failed to call it by its true name: trauma. Instead we ventilate the day to day struggles, the surreal and unfamiliar, and the opportunities to laugh and jest at it all. We’re telling stories, sharing pictures and other images, and any other way to offer our sincere support for one another’s wellbeing. We’re coping to survive.

But the specter of uncompromising devastation and unspeakable anguish lurks between the lines. We are both unexplainably tired and unsatisfyingly stimulated. We are avoiding bad news with all our might, and scouring the internet for new evidence-based revelations. We are having trouble sleeping. We are feeling irritable and judgmental toward others’ choices, and how in their choosing, they may threaten our shared existence. We are feeling guilt for what we have left undone and grief for what we have lost. We are experiencing all this because so many of our values, beliefs, and behaviors (our routines, habits, hobbies, etc.) are being disrupted. This new encompassing reality is defying our capacity to accommodate and/or assimilate all these new challenges, limitations, and needs into our previous functioning. That “new normal” you’ve been hearing about looks an awful lot like the aftermath of trauma.

Only those on the frontlines – the first responders, the hospital workers, the delivery drivers, the workers at the post-offices and grocery stores and pharmacies – can speak of the acute traumas of this pandemic. In the coming weeks, many of us will find ourselves on the frontlines because we become infected or because those near to us succumb. Today, nearly all of us are bystanders, feeling both terror and helplessness. Thanking what remains of our theologies of a benevolent universe and hoping flimsy belief tokens like “But for the grace of God…” don’t get caught in our throats with a shortness of breath.

I am feeling all this and more, and maybe you are too. But I’m also holding two dreams. First is the dream of a community that now recognizes its common fate, that now questions the fabrications of national borders and all other devices of nationalism, and that now experiences a sense of collective belonging that trespasses barriers of all kinds not because we are the same but
because we know that we are together, inescapably cleaved to one another. In this first dream, we remember that we are created to belong to each other.

Second is the dream for an earth who has been devastated by the ravages of human living, and now is receiving an enforced restraining order, albeit a brief reprieve from the wanton and insatiable desires of so-called civilized societies. In this second dream, we reflect on the ways we are not the center of the story of the earth but guests given hospitality in a house we did not build, recipients of generosity we have not earned, and will not ever deserve. In this second dream, we are humbled by and grateful for this hospitality.

Whether these dreams are ever realized, today we will do what’s necessary for our survival because we are wired to survive. Our ancestors did it, and that’s why we’re here now, challenged, yet able to adapt, to reorient, and innovate into the “what’s now” and the “what’s next.” It will be better, the more of it we do with each other’s best interest in mind. It will be better, the more we consider what in the midst and the aftermath of this undoing could be and perhaps should be left behind, and what needs to change, what needs to be learned, what needs to be given our collective attention going forward. This may be the defining crisis of our lifetimes. How do we wished to be defined?

When we’re ready, let’s begin with acknowledging the encompassing traumatic force wrought by this pandemic, and then let’s claim our power, our resolve, and our resourcefulness in learning and growing and loving even as we face the abyss.