



this troubling time

BY CARMEN LAU

Like a wild animal dropping from a tree, this pandemic has startled, then wrapped us all with a measure of uncertainty.

This troubling time comes to some folks as a forced solitude, demanding a tapping of deep reservoirs of resilience and ritualistic coping strategies in an effort to avoid depression, paranoia, selfishness, and a panicked anxiety.

For others, whose work has been deemed “essential,” new procedures, designed to protect, add a level of complication to tasks that previously were rote or mindless.

In this time of trouble, those involved with healthcare bear a particular burden. Physicians plot paths of care for individual patients without seeing their patients in the flesh. Healthcare leaders, often in make-shift offices

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of cramped closets with uncomfortable chairs, race on a treadmill of perpetual planning of strategic systemic responses that attempt to maximize safety, revenue, and access to needed clinical services.

Those involved with patient care face new standards that demand one wear confining gear, which, at times, provides questionable protection. So, this troubling time means that those in direct patient care participate in work that becomes hotter, sweatier, and more exhausting than usual. For some, it means wearing the same mask day after day, an action that previously would have been labeled unsafe for both patient and caregiver. Wearing a fresh mask for extended periods can result in a rash. Re-using the same mask day after day exacts a greater physical toll.

Twenty-first-century society had been high-tech/high-touch; now the high-touch component is becoming a dim memory. Thus, a person lives in this troubling time unable to gain strength from in-the-flesh social networks and incapable of expressing love and gratitude in the usual face-to-face manner. I have heard stories of relatively inexperienced nurses being asked to care for critically ill people without the mentorship that typically would be in place to guide in clinical judgment. Healthcare workers, clad in personal protective gear, can do a task, but this new normal minimizes the physical presence of co-workers and diminishes the ability to use facial expressions or touch to express empathy and connection both to patients and co-workers.

Living in this transitional moment has felt like sliding backwards. Yet, as the days march along, I see that leaving behind my sense of control does two things that, in the end, will be beneficial. First, I will perceive, in the deepest way, the truth that I am like a vessel on a larger ocean. I am not steering this ship, but I am a part of God's system that features love as a primary status. My daily task is to cling to the supremacy of love and to calculate what I can do at this moment to contribute to an ultimate value of love in my circle of influence. Second, when I recognize my lack of control, then I move toward wisdom

and truth. That is to say: By claiming helplessness, I can move toward God.

No matter how this troubling time unfolds, each of us can decide to trudge along in a way that includes a commitment to encourage and support those with whom we come in contact. Such a strategy would be congruent with Holy Spirit work. One meaning for Holy Spirit, or Paraclete, involves the notion of coming alongside. We may not be able to physically come alongside people in this troubling time. But we can listen to their stories and concerns. We can come alongside people by carefully selecting words that show we hear and that we care.

This troubling time reminds us that listening is the first step of Christian witness. Maybe being cloistered in this time of trouble will cause us to revise assumptions that undergird missional focus. Maybe this pandemic will teach us that mutuality and interconnectivity are key parts of God's character that we have previously ignored.



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