

# “Lessons from Another Pandemic”

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In recent weeks, I’ve repeatedly heard the word “unprecedented” used to describe the situation that we’re in.

There is something to that.  
This is a truly extraordinary time.

Never before in human history have so many people the world over suspended so much of what we only recently considered “normal life” that we might protect ourselves and our neighbours from a virus.

Never before have so many people been working together towards a common goal.

This great global effort is a labour of love—for self and for stranger.  
And it is an act of service—an act of deep devotion—to life itself.

While this massive response has been without precedent, dangerous viruses, of course, pop up with some regularity.

Given that we live within a marvellous web of life that includes contagious diseases, such bugs are simply a highly inconvenient part of being human.

And, yet, as Albert Camus observed in his novel *The Plague*, every outbreak catches people “equally by surprise.”

We somehow think ourselves invincible until Mother Nature reminds us that we are not.

This is a lesson some of us have learned before, at other points in our lives, though we may have forgotten it.

That, too, seems to be a part of being human.

Over the past couple of months, I've noticed within myself and among others who survived the worst of the AIDS crisis a shared awareness of how very familiar this moment feels.

HIV and the coronavirus are different, and the pandemics they've unleashed have and will continue to play out in distinct ways.

But there are similarities, too.

For those of us who carry this muscle memory—and I would also say scars from the trauma of it all—there has been a heightened sense of vigilance, of late.

The parallel that comes to mind is how in island cultures in parts of the world prone to tsunamis, there is wisdom passed down the generations that when the earth quakes or when the tide suddenly goes out, you gather up yourself and everyone around you and run as fast as you can for the hills.

The impulse to survive, the imperative to save lives, becomes deeply embedded in our collective memory, sometimes even without it being particularly conscious.

Someday, someday when this is all over, each of us will carry the sacred knowledge of this time forward into a different world.

This memory imprinted on our hearts will save and serve life in ways we can't even now imagine.

In recent days and weeks, I've reflected back on the lessons I learned by living through the AIDS pandemic, as a care giver, and a case worker, and as a chaplain.

And I think there are lessons from this time that are worth sharing.

That pandemic, as I said, unfolded quite differently. You were either affected by it directly, or you weren't.

I recall standing in a grocery store one night  
on my way home from visiting my friend Bill,  
who was in hospital and nearing the end.

I hadn't eaten.  
And I hadn't really been home in days.  
The cupboard was bare,  
so there I was at a grocery store  
standing in line to buy a few things.

And in that moment I was overwhelmed by grief,  
tears rolling down my cheeks.

Bill was not my first friend to die from AIDS, and he was not my last.

But what made the waves of grief washing over me that night  
so difficult to bear was that there, in that grocery store,  
there was seemingly no one who shared my reality.

People were going about their day-to-day lives,  
apparently blissfully unaware that there was a pandemic playing out,  
quite literally, in the neighbourhood around them.

That disconnect was mirrored in the indifference of governments  
that were unforgivably slow to respond,  
too often because of a deadly mix of homophobia and racism.

Fortunately, things are quite different this time.

Aside from a small but persistent minority of people  
resistant or refusing to honour public health guidelines,  
we are all in the same boat and rowing in the same direction.

Countries around the globe have mobilized in common cause,  
embracing that teaching from the Talmud:  
that whoever saves one life saves the entire world.

In this, I find great hope in our imperfect response to this present crisis.

Just over a century ago, as the 1918 flu pandemic took its terrible toll,

life was transformed, like now, in ways big and small.

Diane Bosman shared with me this week  
a couple of Toronto newspaper clips from the time.

In October of that year, the churches in this city  
were taking a range of approaches to the outbreak.

The Anglicans, by order of the bishop,  
were only serving communion at the early service.

The Catholics, while serving communion at all services,  
omitted the sermon,  
presumably to shorten the length of time people were together.

The Baptists were only meeting on Sunday evenings.

And the Unitarians not at all.

The notice reads that services in the First Unitarian Church on Jarvis Street (our  
previous home)  
have been cancelled until further notice.

I would wager, as a result,  
that more members of this congregation survived that wave of the pandemic than  
their neighbours in Christian churches.

Such variations in how we respond to such crises seem par for the course.

Larry Kramer, the AIDS activist and co-founder of ACT UP, has said,  
“Show me a plague, and I’ll show you the world!”

Such times seem to bring out the best and the worst of humanity.

For every hospital worker that would refuse to carry a food tray  
into the room of a person living and dying with AIDS,  
there were strangers who would walk through those same doors  
to hold the hands of men they barely knew as they breathed their last.

Just as today, for every person profiteering  
off of hand sanitizer or face masks,

there are companies retooling overnight  
to manufacture needed equipment  
and scores of people sewing masks to protect the courageous people  
who are serving on the front-lines of this struggle.

For all the change that was wrought by the pandemic a century ago,  
there is surprisingly little written about it by the generation survived.

Some argue today that that was because there was collective shame  
about how people lived through the ordeal.

When this present plague is over,  
my hope is that we will look back on this time  
with gratitude and some degree of pride  
for how we came together to tell a story of resilience.

In my memory of the AIDS crisis—  
a pandemic that is, of course, still ongoing,  
but a disease that is increasingly managed by medications—  
I find in retrospect that I resonate with those works of Dickens,  
that it truly was both the best and worst of times.

It may sound odd to say that, but it is true.

By the time I was 26,  
I had buried a roommate and several friends,  
I had officiated scores of funerals,  
and I had worried for my own well-being.

The accumulation of grief was at times unbearable.

And, yet, living in the light of death  
for so much of my young adulthood was incredibly life-giving.

The writer Andrew Sullivan has said of that time:

Living in a plague is just an intensified way of living.  
It merely unveils the radical uncertainty of life that is already here,  
and puts it into far sharper focus.

We will all die one day,

and we will almost all get sick at some point in our lives;  
none of this makes sense on its own (especially the dying part).

The trick, as the great religions teach us, is counterintuitive:  
not to seize control, but to gain some balance and even serenity  
in absorbing what you can't.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say that in this is an important lesson that we learn and relearn.

“Plague living,” he writes, “is almost seasonal for humans.  
Like the spring which insists on arriving.”

Camus, in his novel, notes that the people of the town under quarantine  
had to reorder their lives.

“Each of us had to be content to live only for the day.”

In other words, they had little choice but to live in the present moment.

To be awake to the now, with its hardship and heartache,  
but also its grace and goodness and generosity.

To live through such times—to live through this time, in our own day—  
invites us to grapple with life's most enduring questions:

What is the meaning of our lives?

How have we used this gift of being alive?

In what ways will I spend myself in service to what I believe, even now?

I made it a practice when I visited people in hospital in the early 90's  
to always drop by the neo-natal unit on my way out.

I would stand and stare through the glass  
at the babies lying there in all of their newborn glory.

An affirmation that even amid the hardest things, life endures.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “How to Survive a Plague,” *New York Magazine*, 20 March 2020.

Friends, we breathe in that same Spirit of Life  
with each breath that we are blessed to draw.

May we, even in this trying time,  
honour that great gift with gratitude.

May life's fragility teach us to cherish our days.

May it open our hearts in compassion  
to all with whom we journey on life's way.

And may it move us, in this extraordinary time,  
to an unprecedented generosity of spirit  
for the living of our days.

Blessed Be.