

July 10, 2020

Blessings, Everyone!

I hope you are all doing well. Dodging the coronavirus. Playing it safe, sensible. Embracing the guidelines that are restricting your normal life (well, “embracing” may not be the perfect verb). Being patient. Being PATIENT! Realizing this is going to be a marathon or a super marathon, not a sprint. Acknowledging that thinking of this as a war may not be the best way to frame it—we are not going to be able to eradicate this virus, beat it, conquer it; we are going to have to live with it for some time, perhaps forever. (BTW, I was never a big fan of the “war” on cancer, drugs, poverty, crime, income inequality, etc.) Keeping your sense of humor (I begin my reading of the newspaper every day with the funnies). Framing the discipline that this pandemic is calling forth from us as a spiritual discipline, a moral obligation to ourselves and our brothers and sisters. Realizing that we have been living in a culture and a time of instant gratification, perhaps more than we have realized. Realizing that we and so many of our fellow citizens, not only in our country but also around the world, operate basically out of what Freud called “the pleasure principle,” the desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain—for US alone, and that this cuts us off from the sense of social connection, the sense of social responsibility that is so sorely needed during this time of trial. Realizing that a lot of people, not only in our country but around the world, are not only science-deniers; they are just stupid.

I think we can do a good job with a lot of these challenges and still be affected by the pandemic restrictions. I think we can do a good job with a lot of these, and still be depressed. I venture to say that every one of my clients (whom I am “seeing” through Zoom teletherapy) admits to having symptoms that are attributable to the pandemic—depression, fear (of sickness, of death), anxiety (about the future, about financial security, about things not being under control), sleep disturbance, bouts of sadness and sometimes crying, exhaustion or low energy, negativistic thinking or pessimism, a sense of being oppressed, irritation/anger, and a pervasive sense of loss. I would just like to say a few words about this pervasive sense of loss because I believe it lies at the root of many of these symptoms. BTW, if you are experiencing some or several of these symptoms, you should know that you’re not alone. I am right there with you. Especially the sleep disturbance and the exhaustion.

First, let me share my experience with my reading over the past three months. I confess that it was helpful to me, at least initially, to frame this restrictive period as my “pandemic retreat.” I was just trying to put a positive spin on it. I really have been reading more than a book a week. I have been reading all kinds of books: astrophysics (Neil deGrasse Tyson); a book on Tibetan Buddhism and quantum physics; Jungian psychology (Murray Stein’s *Minding the Self*); Christian theology (Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*); Zen Buddhism (Charlotte Joko Beck’s *Everyday Zen*); Celtic spirituality (John O’Donohue’s *Anam Cara*); *Trauma and the Loss of the Soul* by Donald Kalsched (in process); Anthony Storr’s *Solitude*; Morton Kelsey’s *Dreams—A Way to Listen to God and Christo-Psychology*; *The Plague* and several essays by Albert Camus, *The Masque of the Red Death* and several other short stories by E. A. Poe, two plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*, and several of my favorite poems by T. S. Eliot; several short stories by O. Henry; Alexandra David-Neal’s

My Journey to Lhasa; Malcolm Gladwell's Talking to Strangers; Dan Brown's Origin; Scott Samuelson's Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering; Meditations by the German mystic Meister Eckhart; Pema Chodron's Practicing Peace; Rick Hanson's Buddha's Brain (a book about the congruence between modern neuropsychology and ancient Tibetan Buddhism); even a book by a brilliant and deeply learned atheist, Edward O. Wilson, The Meaning of Human Existence. I like reading books by intelligent atheists; I find I have more in common with them than I do with some of my fellow Christians.

The interesting thing is that I would describe all of these books as amazing, enlightening, eye-opening, ground-breaking, and a "must-read" for our Tuesday afternoon study group. We are obviously going to have to be together for an extended period, probably several decades to accomplish this! I hope you're not going anywhere (I mean that)! Most of these books were harvested from the large pile standing next to my reading chair in my home study. So, either they are all really amazing or I have not been doing enough reading over the past few years. I have discovered or rediscovered that I have a hunger for learning, especially the learning experience that comes to me through reading real books (not computer books), and that this feeds not only my desire to understand and provides me with resources for my parish and counseling ministry; it truly feeds my soul. When this whole thing ends (whenever that happens), I vow to continue to read as much as I have been reading these past three months. (With my somewhat checkered history with vows and New Year's resolutions, I suspect this will be a challenge.). When my life gets busy, my reading is always the first thing to go. Or is it exercise? Or perhaps meditation?

Today I would like to talk about one of these amazing books. You really have to read it! But just in case you have a lot of other things to do, other things on your mind and your plate, the book speaks to what we are all going through in this challenging period. The book, by Johann Hari, is entitled Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression—and the Unexpected Solutions.

Hari notes that he suffered from depression since childhood; he started taking antidepressants as a teenager. At that time, he was told that his anxiety and depression were caused by a chemical imbalance in his brain. What he was told was characteristic of the materialistic reductionism that is, unfortunately, still "all the rage" nowadays.

By the way, anxiety and depression almost always go together and may not even be separate categories of psychological distress. Research has shown that everything that causes an increase in depression also causes an increase in anxiety, and vice versa. The diagnoses overlap. In fact, I believe that the NIH no longer funds studies that treat them as separate. Following his rejection by the first person he ever loved, Hari became depressed, though it took him some time to realize it. Following up on what he had learned as a child/teenager, he initially viewed what he was experiencing as a medical condition, as something that was wrong with his brain. He was told that his depression was the result of depleted levels of serotonin. What he needed to return to normal was the regular ingestion (probably for the rest of his life) of SSRIs—Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors. After all, if his depression was a matter of chemistry, then chemistry should be the cure, should bring him back to

normal.

Hari found this explanation and rationale for taking SSRIs reasonable. He recalled that his mother had been depressed and had taken “pills.” Perhaps depression “ran in his family.” Perhaps it was genetic. This provided even a stronger basis for a chemical response to his symptoms, since the genetic theory or etiology of psychological problems is simply a modification of the medical-chemical understanding of these “diseases.” Something is wrong with your body, with your brain, not with your mind, your psyche, or your life.

As I was reading Hari’s account, it made me think back to my initial studies in psychology. Before the mental health experts thought of depression as a disease, a brain disease, they understood it as a reaction, usually a normal (and perhaps even a healthy) reaction to a life circumstance like the loss of a loved one, or a combination of life circumstances, usually losses of some kind. They spoke of an exogenous or reactive depression as compared to an endogenous depression that does not have an identifiable trigger (which is less common than one might think). This same way of thinking applied to schizophrenia. It used to be referred to in the literature as schizophrenic reaction, paranoid, or catatonic, or simple, or hebephrenic type. Schizophrenia was seen as one among many possible reactions (a dramatic, self-protective one) to an extremely unhealthy life situation. I confess that although I understand that there may be a genetic component to schizophrenia and that some people seem to have a physiological vulnerability to this syndrome, I still view it the old-fashioned way. Some of the early psychoanalysts, e.g., Frieda Fromm Reichmann, were successful in treating schizophrenics through long-term individual psychotherapy. This would not be possible if the syndrome were purely a matter of chemistry or something defective in the brain.

Hari took antidepressants for many years in various combinations and doses. He admits he became an evangelist of sorts for antidepressants—for the claim that they made one not only well, but “better than well.” However, he began to notice that he wasn’t really getting better. His periods of sadness returned despite the medications. When he noted this to his prescribing physician or psychiatrist, the response was always to either increase the dosage, switch to a different antidepressant, or to put together a cocktail of drugs. This, obviously, increased the prevalence of several serious side effects.

Hari first began to question the prevailing “broken brain” theory thanks to a doctor who challenged his use of medications. The doctor pointed out the obvious to Hari—that, despite his antidepressant regimen, he was still depressed. Hari then began to wonder if perhaps there were any reasons for his being depressed. This is a psychological question, not a psychiatric one. If it was a matter of chemistry, then chemistry should be the cure, should bring him back to normal.

In the course of his investigations, Hari discovered that everything he had been taught about his problems, his psychological symptoms, was wrong. He unearthed empirically based research that challenged the efficacy of psychotropic medications and showed how depression and anxiety are caused by the way we live. So, basically Hari discovered or rediscovered (Jung said this a long time ago) the meaningfulness of

psychological symptoms. He began to investigate this hypothesis not only in individuals and in our society/culture, but also around the world.

I won't go into detail about the various research studies, clinical examples, and real-life examples that Hari draws from in his book; I wouldn't want to spoil it for you if you read it. I would just mention that Hari explores depression from a sociological as well as a personal psychological viewpoint. He notes that 1 in 5 US adults are taking at least one drug for a psychological problem, and that 1 in 4 middle-aged women are on antidepressants. He discovered that in France, 1 in 3 people are on antidepressants, and that the United Kingdom has the highest use of antidepressants in Europe. As he pondered why so many people around the world are feeling depressed, he realized that it had to do with loss, with what Hari came to call lost connections.

This shouldn't come as a surprise to us. Freud and Jung talked about the withdrawal of libido, psychic energy, following the loss of a love object. When a loved one dies (or leaves us or rejects us), the normal, natural, healthy response is depression. The psyche knows that it needs to pull back the investment of psychic energy from the person who is no longer with us. This energy, according to Jung, sinks down into the unconscious where it activates the archetypes, the structural components of the collective unconscious, which then guide our new and emerging attachment to life. It is like the tide; it goes in, but then it goes back out again.

I always think it's cute when people "discover" a psychological truth that has not only been known to psychologists since the time of Freud, Jung, and Adler, but has been known to the world's religions for thousands of years. Long before the advent of psychology, which is a little more than a century old, we framed and then responded to troubling, painful, and even traumatic life events from a spiritual perspective. Jung says that the world's great religions have functioned throughout history as collective mental health treatments; they provided the psychological guidance that people needed to traverse the labyrinthian maze of this earthly life.

Where I think Hari makes a notable contribution to our way of looking at depression is in his expansion of our understanding of lost connections. Hari says that the root of many of our personal depressive symptoms and the depressions that characterize our societies, our cultures, lie in the absence of or serious disconnection with:

1. Meaningful work
2. Other people
3. Meaningful values
4. Our deepest self because of childhood trauma
5. Status and a sense of healthy self-respect
6. Nature and the natural world
7. A hopeful future
8. A secure future
9. A sense of meaning in life
10. The sense that we are making a contribution to this life

Think about how many of these we are experiencing as we move through (or feel we are stuck in) this pandemic and our personal and social response to it. Think of all

those who have lost their health, their work, their financial security, their sense of safety and security, their sense of community, their sense of hope for a future, their contact with other people, their ability to be productive, to make a difference, and even the loss, the death of loved ones. As I read Hari's book, I also thought of how many of us were missing or lacking one or more of these in our lives even before the coronavirus took its toll on us.

As I neared the end of Hari's book, I thought of how important the church, how important our church could be in restoring some of these lost connections. I thought about the importance of our religious faith and how important it is to ground our hope, our security in our relationship with God. I thought about our worship service, how it connects us with something greater than ourselves, how it enables us to encounter the transcendent, how it gives us a sense of meaning in life, how it recharges our batteries. The church provides us with a sense of community, of connection. I thought about our mission outreach, our communal effort to make this a better world for our brothers and sisters, how this helps us feel connected with people we will never even meet. Religion provides us with meaningful values, with a moral code. It connects us with nature, with the beauty and fragility of this world that God has entrusted to us. It also can provide not only solace but physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

I wondered why Hari never mentioned that the church is probably the one institution that addresses all or almost all of these needs, that helps us establish or restore these vital connections. At the end of the book, Hari confesses that he is an atheist, and that this is why he chooses not to mention the importance of the church to our society and prayer to us as individuals. I found this amusing—and not really good science. Even if you are not a believer, there is no doubt that what we are doing as a church is important!

We have a lot that we can receive from our church, and we have a lot that we can give to and through it. We have what it takes to move through this period with faith, with hope, and with a sense of connection, of oneness with our brothers and sisters around the world.

Be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Keep the faith. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul