

America 2.0—Picking Up the Pieces

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It has been said that when you are wrestling a grizzly bear, you don't stop when you are done, you stop when the grizzly is done. Covid-19 is such a grizzly, and it is not done. It has sickened over four and a half million of us and killed over a hundred and fifty thousand of us. So far. Another grizzly has been the long-time festering boil of systemic racism, fought so hard by John Lewis and finally lanced—again—this summer by the murder of George Floyd; eight minutes and forty-six seconds of horror caught on a cellphone for all of us to see. What these events have done, is to show us in very stark terms where and how we have fallen short of what we, as a country, have aspired to be, and what many of us thought we were, or were working toward. Systemic racism, accelerating climate change, gaps in health care, income inequality, rampant gun violence, lack of affordable housing are all problems we recognized, and have for years at least tried to ameliorate. But in a lot of ways we, as a nation, have just given them lip service.

Huge problems. They seem insurmountable. But the choice of no choice, of not addressing these conditions is no longer viable, in a very literal sense of the word. From “I can't breathe” to over 150,000 Covid-19 deaths, to projected unlivable high temperatures and rising sea levels, how we live, *if we live*, is being challenged. And because all things are connected, all these things must be addressed. Simultaneously. This puts us, individually, as a faith community and as a nation at a turning point. Where do we go from here?

A very wise woman once told me that life teaches us what we need to know. I have my own corollary to that and it is that it's a good idea to pay attention and learn what life is teaching, because some of those lessons you really don't want to be destined to relive. So. What do we need to know?

We need to know that we are not each other's enemies; that we are all in this together. The corona virus does not discriminate. It will hijack your body to replicate itself and use you for a vector to replicate in others. However, like a lion in a herd of zebras, it will take a larger toll on those of

us who are vulnerable in some way. Aged. Diabetic. Battling cancer, heart disease or some other medical condition. But when it strikes and kills those of us who are Black or Hispanic or Indigenous at levels proportionally far beyond those of us who are not, something else is going on. Some combination of lack of access to sufficient health care, jobs that put one in harm's way, and the unrelenting stress of “living while Black” or “being invisible while Native American” in a society that denies that it is racist but really is, is the culprit. And even though as a nation we are currently divided along political lines in ways that stifle problem solving and consensus building, we need to find ways to own our pasts so that we can create a more just future.

We need to know that we rely on delivery drivers, grocery clerks, EMTs, nursing home caregivers, custodial and cleaning staffs, refuse collectors, phlebotomists, and farmers, among many others, to keep us functional and fed as a society. *See them.* Particularly during this epidemic, the work they do is essential and can be as dangerous as are the jobs of the heroic doctors and nurses on the front lines in hospitals. Their pay needs to reflect that. And while we're at it, all jobs should pull at least a living wage, and there needs to be reliable, onus-free safety nets for those who cannot work, particularly during a crisis like this one. Surely, we can make that happen.

We need to know that affordable, available health care, in this country and in this century, is a right, because look what happens when it isn't. We need to have an ample, workable supply chain for health care *equipment*, because look what happened when we didn't. We also need to be able to test for Covid-19, and be able to read the tests in real time, because how can you trace it if you don't?

We need to know that all the things we were working on before the pandemic still need to be worked on. The need for affordable housing, immigration reform, environmental justice, and educational parity has not gone away. Indeed, these needs are greater now than ever. In many ways they intersect so that solutions to one challenge will benefit another, but

how we address them will certainly be affected because *now* we see them through the twin lenses of racial justice and Covid-19 safety.

This is a lot of work at a time when fear, frustration, and uncertainty creep into our very psyches. I deeply miss seeing my family as often as I would like, and not hugging them when I do see them is hard. I miss singing live in the moment as a group. We breathe together in choir a lot—I never noticed it as a thing until we no longer met in person. Sometimes I just need a hug, and I am grateful I don’t live alone. My heart goes out to those of us who do. Life can be scary and uncertain right now, and just *different*, and it is easy to lose hope, flame out in anger, give credence to bad advice, or to succumb to depression or denial. Some of these are steps we take when we mourn, and in a way, we *are* mourning. Mourning ways of life and being that are not viable now, and which may not be for some time. Mourning the loss of a job or the closing of a long-worked-for business. Mourning that so many lives have been shortened and constrained by latent racism. Mourning our dead and facing our fear of death. Let’s take a breath and hold these things up. But some of the ways of life that are no longer viable include veneration of Jim Crow era statues and naming military installations for people who wanted to secede from the country. Really? Surely it is past time to take a breath, acknowledge another’s pain and let *that* stuff go.

Honestly, we are stronger than we think and resilient in so very many ways. We have adapted to things that would never have occurred to us just a year ago. We have homeschooled our children or figured out how to teach classes effectively online. We have worked from home if we were privileged enough to be able to. We went to work where we were needed, and Macgyvered PPE when we had to. We learned what it is like to find empty shelves—empty *aisles*—at the grocery store. We skyped our elders in nursing homes when we could not visit in person and mourned from afar if they sickened and died. We have fed our neighbors, stayed home when we could and learned or re-learned how to make bread and yogurt, or to grow herbs and vegetables. We have learned that it is ok to accept the help of others when we need it, as poverty is often one paycheck away, and many of us are surviving financial hits that will take years to overcome. We also need to learn to be realistic with our vulnerable, mourning selves and loved

ones, and take a break, take a walk, act silly, scream, cry, vent—whatever it takes to stay sane. We are dealing with a lot, all at once, and it is important to remember to savor the world as well as save it. This is *also* how one grows resilience.

We need to know that even as we have watched air quality improve over cities when we were self-sequestering, *that* improvement has not been sustainable as we have re-entered more normal life. Even as we have and must take ourselves into green spaces for the benefit of our mental, physical, and emotional well-being, we need to know that the earth is vulnerable to changes that are not amenable to our own survival. Our actions have been responsible for that. For far too long, we have treated the earth as both a storehouse and a sewer. So. In addition to our own resilience, we must also continue to work toward sustainability; and an economy not dependent on growth that depletes the environment, so that the *earth* can be resilient as well.

The resilience we have learned and are continuing to learn, is the long-term sustainable kind; the kind that will take us through this. We are learning that resilience requires a combination of self-sufficiency and deep concern for the welfare of others. Why else would so many of us, *in a pandemic*, have taken to the streets to protest the murders of our Black brothers and sisters by those whom we should be able to count on to protect and serve? This difficult balance of equal and opposite needs is a frustrating skill to learn, a piece of Both/And that we will be called on to exercise going forward. It is what we need to use when we live in a healthy democracy. It is how we ensure the future of a viable climate on a healthy earth. It is how we negotiate a balance between protecting health and opening an economy. It is how we figure out how to stay safe and still attend church, or find ways to educate *all* our children this fall; how we visit our families, or even *if* we visit our families. It is how we make sure that all of us who are of age can vote in November. Safely. After all, as John Lewis wrote in his letter published posthumously:

“The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.”

All of these things we need to do nationally, locally, denominationally, and individually. The road will be rough and muddy, but we will get there. Our eight principles will be our guide if we are brave enough to live by them, and kind enough to forgive ourselves and each other when we do not. We can and will—no, we *must* rise to the challenge.

Dear ones, we can *do* this. We are strong, we are resilient, and we have staying power. We have each other to lean on. So, take a breath, again, and know that the soft skills of kindness, working together and listening to one another will carry us forward. Know that we have both voice and power, and that when we join together, our voices and our power are amplified exponentially. Know that we are curious and inventive and really, really good with tinkering around with stuff. Stuff like wind turbines and vaccines and livable cities. We may even learn to be good at leaving things alone, like forests and coral reefs. We *can* do this. Together. *All* of us.

Blessed be.

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