

Pandemic Reflections by Brethren Chaplain, Rev. Dr. Becky Baile Crouse

On Friday March 13, 2020, my daughter was supposed to have flown to Spain for her spring break from her second year of law school at the University of Chicago. She called the Monday before to inform me that her professor had decided it was too risky for them to go and do research with migrants as they had planned. My husband was planning to fly to Florida March 14 to visit his elderly parents whom he had not seen for almost a year. Suddenly, our family was thrust into the big dilemmas of “should we travel or not” that was part of our COVID 19 journey. My husband did in fact fly to Florida and my daughter chose to come home to Missouri March 15. Both were uncertain if flights would even continue as the drama unfolded.

Heading into the Unknown

As Assistant Director managing nine chaplains at a pediatric hospital providing 24/7 coverage, I immediately began getting information including a complex guide about caring for COVID 19 patients, which a doctor in China had produced to share with others in healthcare. It showed photos of people in protective gear that looked like space suits. After much discussion, our chaplain group opted to stay “in the house” to cover our 300-bed facility, using some tele-chaplaincy at times, particularly in COVID positive rooms, but also continuing in-person visitation as much as possible.

Our anxiety and fear for our own health, as well as that of our loved ones, was a constant concern. I recall chaplains putting their cellular phones in plastic bags for fear they would take the virus home. We all kept washing our hands, hair, and clothes as much as possible when we returned home at night. To this day I use hand sanitizer upon

arrival at work and wipe down my light switch, doorknob, phone and computer keyboard before I begin my workday. For many months, we did not have access to proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Finally in August of 2020, we were approved to get N95s to use when responding to traumas, codes and deaths.

Reframing

I have worked at Children's Mercy for 18.5 years. I have been extremely blessed with good health throughout my tenure and had decided to take a three-week break (the longest time away I would have even had) to celebrate my milestone birthday (age 60). My cousin and I had been talking about walking a portion of the Camino to Santiago Spain for the past 10 years. We had purchased our plane tickets in October 2019 and were planning to fly to Porto Portugal on May 22. All of that changed rather quickly after COVID 19 began. By the end of March, I knew that I would NOT be going to Spain and I would NOT be taking my much-anticipated break from both my chaplain position and my part-time church work on a pastoral team at Warrensburg Church of the Brethren. Deep grief set in and it took me much of April to "reframe" and find gratitude for my situation. Having done a doctorate with African colleagues in the United Methodist church, I still have regular contact with people living on the edge of existence. Knowing their situation makes it hard for me to feel sorry for myself because I DO have hot water and electricity round the clock. In an effort at humor and reframing, I scheduled my 10-year colonoscopy on May 22, the day I was to have flown to Spain. I still took a week off in May and my cousin and I "walked" around Warrensburg in our masks and hiking gear getting signatures from people we met on our "Cami-MO" (Camino in Missouri).

Beyond Fatigue

We are now nineteen months into this pandemic. My daughter ended up staying at home for 5.5 months of 2020 before returning to study in-person in Chicago. My husband ended up working remotely all spring of 2020 and has had many long days supporting hundreds of high school students studying both in person and virtual learning as a high school counselor. He has tested positive for COVID twice (once asymptomatic in June 2020 and a second time Jan. 20, 2021, with symptoms) before we were fully vaccinated in early 2021. Everyone I know on the front lines is beyond tired. There is a decision fatigue I have never felt before. Mid-summer 2021 we were all hopeful the pandemic was going to soon be history and then the Delta surge hit. Maintaining hope and resilience have taken on new meaning in this context. It is no surprise that there are “hiring” and “help wanted” signs everywhere as frontline workers deal with exhaustion, anxiety and stress. I saw a sign at the Missouri State Fair that resonated with me: “Be kind, the world is short-staffed.”

As a Spanish-speaking Chaplain, I frequently go into Spanish-speaking COVID 19 positive rooms to visit distraught parents. We have enough PPE, so I have been able to see these parents and provide support. It keeps me on edge thinking about whether I’m going to get the virus or take it home to my husband or elderly parents. But God grants me courage and strength to keep going and bringing hope and healing to distressed patients and parents. It is a privilege to encourage them, help them find resources and offer prayers for healing.

Unfortunately, 2021 has been a more difficult year in our pediatric setting as we have experienced an increase in the overall number of patient deaths, especially sudden

deaths in our emergency room and seen a dramatic increase in the number of COVID positive children needing hospitalization. One of my newest chaplains who just completed Clinical Pastoral Education said she held the hands of up to seven adult patients who died of COVID in one shift. Often family members were not permitted so the chaplain holds the phone or iPad as family members share their final goodbyes. There is no way to describe the emotional and spiritual toll that type of ministry and pastoral presence takes on healthcare staff and chaplains.

Time for Self-care and Renewal

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, author of the book *Trauma Stewardship*, presented Grand Rounds at the hospital in 2020 and led conversations with our psychosocial teams. Hearing the reminders to “protect our mornings” and “nurture gratitude” as well as get enough sleep resonated with me. Our chaplains have received support from many other departments throughout the year and I personally have received special encouragement from members of my congregation who encourage self-care and time for renewal. While I have struggled to make sure we have chaplaincy coverage 24/7, I also have encouraged the staff to have work-life balance during the pandemic. We have gone to four 10-hour days and taken PTO regularly. Having a firm faith that God will make a way through this wilderness continues to help me keep coming back to work each new day.

One Sunday last year I led our congregation in a time of lament...each of the 30 households on Zoom shared their laments and losses. I don't think there is a way to get our arms around all that we have lost due to the pandemic. The loss of touch with social distancing. The loss of family gatherings and celebrations. The loss of what used to be

simple becoming life-threatening. My prayer is that God will indeed give us all a wise heart and that we can continue to foster humility and extend grace to those in our care.

As a chaplain who walks with families through grief, loss, and death on a daily basis, I am more mindful of thanking God for each new day we have on this earth to share God's love and compassion. For me, cherishing God's creation, watching the monarch butterflies migrate or harvesting tomatoes and butternut from the garden, are part of God's good gifts around us. May we emerge from the cocoon of this pandemic with new insights for the journey that will make our world a better place for all creation.

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