

Liberated by a Pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic and its resulting social distancing and shelter-at-home policies have certainly impacted our lives profoundly in multiple ways, depending upon our distinct situations. Some of us are still working: some working entirely from home; some teaching in a brand-new format – online teaching; some working in stressful situations where we are daily exposed to other people; some caring for children 24/7 and trying to keep them busy and safe. Some of us are not working – unemployed, furloughed from work, retired. All of us are trying to learn to live in a world where we are currently required to stay in our homes as much as possible, in a world where we cannot readily reach out and physically see or touch our friends and family members. We are directed to only go out to get groceries, pick up our medications, and/or take a walk – six feet from one another.

In some ways, it feels like we have been imprisoned by the COVID 19 pandemic. But perhaps we have really been freed. Let me explain my thought.

Recently, I was walking with my dog Kebo one evening and ended up having a conversation with a friend, she on her front porch and me at the obligatory six-foot distance from her on the sidewalk. She said, “I don’t know what to do with myself. I work. What do I do with myself when I don’t work?” We then continued our conversation, she sharing that she had been thinking about perhaps doing some crafts that she hadn’t done for years.

This encounter really got me thinking. Not that I hadn’t been thinking before, but it was a deeper pondering. I, too, work, and I get things done. That’s who I am. It partially comes from a childhood where if I expressed that I was bored, my mother always had her response - a chore to do – wash the walls, clean the hairbrushes. As well, I internalized messages from that childhood that told me that my worth was in what I accomplished, and as I developed my profession of teacher, and ultimately professor, I saw my personhood as being a giver, a server of others. When I retired, although now I wasn’t “working,” I continued in the same vein. I became very involved with the rotating homeless shelter here in Mt. Pleasant, I developed and co-lead a Central Votes Coalition on campus to engage CMU students in civic action, and I work

in a number of areas here at UUFCM – choir, building team, Social Justice Coordinating Team and Worship Team.

But now, this pandemic and its resulting excess of time, have got me thinking beyond all these projects and work. Many of these are now completed – all reports are turned in, much of my yardwork is done, my house has not yet been cleaned but that is not going to happen right away, and there's yet simply a lot more time available to me. Who am I if I am not getting things done and/or working all the time? When people don't need me, or when I don't perceive that I am needed, what do I do for myself?

I'm not a person who has developed a lot of "hobbies." When people ask me what I do for fun, I always respond with "I work, which I enjoy, and I play softball and I play pickleball or go to a movie once in a blue moon." But what happens if this shelter-in-place, or even social distancing, continue for quite a while? Then what will I do?

Here's where the imprisoned by the COVID 19 pandemic comes in – as well as the notion that maybe it has freed us. Actually, I can't speak for you all, but I'll speak for myself. Given the great amount of time that every day provides – yes, I still eat, sleep, exercise, and walk with Kebo at least twice a day - there's still lots of time left. So I ask myself, "What do you want to do?" A fairly novel idea for me, as I have much of my life done what I needed to do, accomplish things and serve others. "But what do I WANT to do? What might be something that I may have thought of before but not done because of lack of time?" And, "is it OK to do these things just because I want to?"

Not without struggle, and because it's hard for me to sit still, I've actually come up with some ideas, some that I've tried and some that I'm still thinking about. Whereas before it was hard for me to just sit and watch a TV show, now I have spent two-three hours a day watching either one-hour episodes or a whole movie. I'm coloring in a coloring book given to me by a friend, but before I said I didn't have time for such meaningless activity. I've taken out my guitar which I haven't played just for me in a long, long time, and spent an hour or so, just playing and singing songs from my songbook in which I used to write songs that I liked. I've played the piano – not hymns, but songs from books like "Great Songs of the 60s." I've put on CDs of songs from various decades and danced to them in my kitchen. I felt a bit self-conscious with that one at first, and Kebo certainly didn't know what to do with me, but now it feels OK. I've thought about

ordering some stamped cross stitch kits, but so far haven't done anything about it. And I've actually thought about maybe looking up a recipe and cooking something; that's not happened yet either.

Doing all these "new" things has not been completely easy. As I've watched TV or colored or played the guitar or piano, I sometimes find myself feeling a bit uneasy. The old messages of "this is time that could be used constructively" sometimes edge their way into my mind. "This isn't who Norma is" sometimes tries to cloud my enjoyment.

Yet, I've stayed with doing these new things because that's what I mean by feeling freer. Whereas before I would not have even considered most of these ideas because "that's not who Norma is," and because I felt I didn't have time, I'm finding myself truly open to them. And in opening and freely considering them, I'm exploring other ways that perhaps my personhood might be more than just Norma the doer, Norma the worker, Norma the achiever. I find it a bit scary to be in this place because that's not what I'm comfortable with, what I'm used to. But that's what I mean by being freed by the pandemic; perhaps I'm exploring another part of this person I've resided in for so many years.

Now, my sharing here may not be your story at all. Perhaps you have most often been open to responding to your wants, to what you would like to do. Or perhaps you are more like me – working and/or caring for children, with little time to engage in what you would like to do.

Regardless, here's what I'm thinking. The mission of this Fellowship is that we are a religious community, guided by love, transforming our lives and our world. I think I've been spending most of my life's energies on transforming the world, and this COVID-19 pandemic has freed me up to take a look at transforming myself. How about you? What might you do that you've always thought about doing but haven't done because you didn't have enough time? In what ways are you connecting with yourself? In what ways are you connecting with others? In what ways are you connecting with the world? Has the pandemic freed you up, and what are you doing with that freedom? Perhaps this would be a great topic to share in the chat box? Or perhaps in the Coffee Hour break-out sessions.