

COVID-19: an opportunity for cultivating a fresh approach to spirituality?



This portal could provide an opportunity to hear “nature speaking back”. Image: 123rf.com, silverjohn.

Many people are understandably on edge about the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic also allows us to cultivate a fresh, contemplative approach to our own spiritual formation, writes Peter Mudge.

The presence and consequences of COVID-19 (hereafter C19) are very familiar to all of us. If you study the all-too-common image of the C19 virus often presented in the media, perhaps it might resemble a threatening satellite orbiting in space or a malicious landmine floating just below the surface of our quotidian existence. In both respects it is unseen and menacing. To add to this anxiety, we are confronted with C19 reports and statistics on a daily if not hourly basis. Hence the analogy by some politicians that we are involved in a type of ‘war’ with an invisible predator. Yet it is equally an opportunity to reflect calmly on ‘what matters most’, and to respond with love, hope and imagination. The aim of this article is to assist the reader to reflect on three crucial areas posed in the form of questions, and related to the above.

1. Is this the time to practise or renew some spiritual disciplines?

Indian novelist Arundhati Roy (2020) writes: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next”. Is this new portal one that allows us to frame and practise our spirituality in new and innovative ways?

This portal could provide an opportunity to hear “nature speaking back”, and to imagine a better world with less noise, more room for bike-riding, fewer plane flights, more quality family time, and renewed appreciation of animals, trees and other forms of life. Hart (2020) reflects that “one of the great hazards of these days [is] the boredom from not being able to act, to have moral agency” (p.623). This, in turn, represents a caution to avoid “any boredom that blocks us from contemplating new ideas, reinvigorated passions, and desire to strike out on new paths” (p.624).

Yet it is “strike out” that we need to do! Examples of such new spiritual paths might be – reading sacred or spiritual narratives (the *Book of Job* is a particularly apt one to contemplate), to study one’s spiritual tradition and its various mystical and sacramental

expressions throughout the ages (McGinn, 2006), to practise or renew a spiritual discipline such as *lectio divina*, the *Examen*, the Rosary, or journaling. Why not pray the daily office from Universalis, or recite a mantra from John Cassian: "O God, come to my aid; Lord, make haste to help me" (*Ps* 69:2). It could be the time to write haiku poetry, or to cultivate even just one virtue during lockdown such as compassion, patience or detachment (for working examples, see Mudge, 2019 & 2020; see n.3 below).

2. *An opportunity to slow down and return to Sabbath living?*

There are many available resources on "the slow movement" such as Haemin Sunim's (2018) book entitled *The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down*. The C19 pandemic provides many with an opportunity to "slow down" and to rediscover the restfulness and creativity that flows from keeping Sabbath. There are many dimensions to "slowing down". Sunim, a Korean Buddhist monk, observes that just because the world moves fast, that doesn't mean that we have to! There emerges a strength and joy from slowing down. Sunim draws compassion from a life full of change and endeavours to encourage all of us to notice that when we slow down, the world slows down with us. Walking is the "perfect speed"!

On the topic of recommitment to the Sabbath, Walter Brueggemann notes that the Sabbath is much neglected in contemporary society. He views the Sabbath as an opportunity to "re-soul" the person, their neighbourhood, and their existence. The Sabbath is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh and Caesar (still prevalent in various forms today). It is a refusal to let one's life be defined by busyness or production. How can this C19 period allow you more time to slow down and to recommit to the Sabbath? How can it connect you to the disadvantaged and vulnerable in your community?

3. *What is "the one virtue necessary"?*

This period dominated by the C19 pandemic is an ideal opportunity to reflect on "the one virtue necessary". In a segment on ABC News, Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison (2020) cited a virtue that he deemed essential to the current situation: "Patience must become the virtue of Australians". What do you consider to be "the one virtue necessary"? Perhaps you agree with "patience" – or perhaps you would opt for courage, justice or kindness? For the medieval Dominican, Meister Eckhart, detachment is the supreme virtue, the virtue which in fact comprehends all the other virtues – even faith, love and humility. Eckhart asserts that to be truly prayerful is to be detached (Mills, 2000).

I base this section's question primarily on the spirit in which Jesus challenged Martha in *Luke 10:38–42* (NRSV). During this episode, when Jesus visits the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, Martha complains that she is overwhelmed with domestic duties and that her sister Mary, sitting at the feet of the Teacher, ought to help her – a request that was potentially insulting to the visiting Jewish rabbi. Jesus replies:

"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled by many things. But there is need for only one. Mary chose the good part. It won't be taken away from her" (*Luke 10:41–42*).

What then is this "one thing necessary"? Jesus' expression "there is need for only one" refers to "the essential note of hospitality which is to pay attention to the guest; only that is necessary; the rest is optional" (Johnson, 1991, p.174, n. 42).

Popular or central virtues have changed and sometimes become 'lost' throughout history. Ron Rolheiser, for example, notes the routine obfuscation of "gratitude" as a central virtue. Joan Chittister refers to humility as "the lost virtue". Thomas Aquinas cites prudence. For CS Lewis, the chief virtue, without which others could not exist, is courage. Benedict of Nursia

opts for humility, Karen Armstrong identifies compassion, while for Gregory Palamas and other Eastern mystics it would be stillness in the form of *hesychasm* (the prayer of quiet, rest or silence). What is your central, lived, and “one necessary” virtue? How would you ‘demonstrate’ to a hidden observer that you live out this virtue in a serious and enduring manner?

The focus questions in this article provide three significant pathways for revisiting and reinvigorating our spirituality during this most difficult of times. We are living in a period of both crisis and opportunity. How can you engage with it and make the most of it? Even benefit from it?

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