Success when Nothing Happens

March 21, 2020



The world as we knew it has run off the rails. We're rapidly rushing along without guardrails into our next new state of normal. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of everyone on the planet. What can we do? How can we help push our lives to some state of comfort and predictability?

On March 20, 2020, the Illinois governor's press conference on the pandemic included a 7-minute talk by Dr. Emily Landon who is the Executive Medical Director, Infection Prevention and Control at University of Chicago Medicine. The Dr's talk is one of the most persuasive pieces I've heard about why everyone should shelter in place and practice physical distancing. Her talk is here (Click Here), but the part that touched me deeply was when she talked about how non-sheltered healthy people are one or our greatest risks:

> "In short, without taking drastic measures, the healthy and optimistic among us will doom the vulnerable. We have to fight this fire before it grows too high. These extreme restrictions may seem, in the end, a little anticlimactic. Because it's really hard to feel like you're saving the world when you're watching Netflix from your couch.
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> But if we do this right, nothing happens. Yeah. A successful shelter in place means that you're going to feel like it was all for nothing. And you'd be right. Because nothing means that nothing happened to your family. And that's what we're going for here."

Success when nothing happens? I interpret this seemingly ironic phrase to mean when nothing happens from a perspective of our embedded societal standard of "changing things." We judge our lives and our progress by what changes we make. But we're now in a crisis when we don't want anything to change—particularly regarding getting ill or dying. We don't want that kind of change for us or our family. We want nothing to happen. And to achieve this kind of nothing means doing things that appear to achieve nothing.

What else might be in the category of doing the right thing when it appears that we're doing nothing? Of course, I take a religious view of this question and offer several acts (or inactions) that can answer the question:

--praying (can appear to be ineffective wasted time—or is it?)
--not responding to anger with anger (doing nothing—but avoiding an escalation)
--watching waves on the beach (nothing to show for this effort—except some peace of mind)
--not talking, but just being present with someone (nothing outwardly changed, but we form our most powerful connections with others)
--supporting our Fellowship with your time/talent/treasure (can appear to be a drop-in-the-bucket—but may make a future possible for those who come after us)
--cleaning and straightening (when things will just get messy and disorganized again)
--smiling when you walk by people (may not matter—but you may lighten up someone's miserable day)

I'd put all of these actions/inactions in the category of ministry—and trying to be a good UU.

We can be succeeding when it appears that nothing is happening. We can be personally transformed even though nothing changes in our appearance. We can be comforted in our inactions knowing that it really matters if they are for the greater good, a higher purpose, or complying with our beliefs. We can succeed if we separate our behavior from our cultural success criterium of only making a difference by changing things. May we be gentle on ourselves as we shelter in place—and be proud that we're appearing to do nothing…

…….peace to all……..Rev Russ

Some more Haiku for our time:

What changes with time?
Everything—and nothing.
Such is our life's course.

Changing nothing is
doing the right thing sometimes.
Always chose the right.

Why must we be judged
by what's done—not what's undone.
Who am I to judge?

Do I harm others?
Maybe when I ignore them.
May eyes see clearly.

Social distancing—
Separate but equal.
All in—together.

What is success now?
Doing or not? What is it?
What is best for us all.