

What Works

We have all been under great stress, and the end is not in sight yet. I'm not going to review the fears, dread, and anxiety we are experiencing. It is time to move into response. I started searching for what works and I'm going to tell you what I've found. It boils down to 1) Internal resilience, and 2) External support. But first, I'll clue you in to my journey.

I went online and found many thousands of advice web sites from places like the Red Cross, CDC, FEMA, Homeland Security, etc., for how to prepare an emergency backpack to sustain life for 24 hours, or a two week stockpile, in case of an earthquake or forest fire in the West or hurricanes in the South. Nothing about a pandemic. "Anita Chandra, a disaster researcher at the RAND institute, said: 'Institutions are worried they can't get to people in time . . . the resources are very mismatched against need.' People have to be able to help themselves, but a risk of this change of message is that it suggests that the government is abrogating its responsibilities, either out of incompetence or because of some kind of rugged-individualism message." I discovered that the disaster preppers who have stockpiled guns, food, and water for themselves alone are not wacky but simply accepted that we are alone in crises, looking out for ourselves. No wonder paper towels and toilet paper flew off the store shelves. Those isolationists who needed justification turned to Ralph Waldo Emerson's Self-Reliance:

"I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me."

--or--

Do not tell me . . . of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong.

--or--

"A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he."

I asked myself, how did they co-opt Grandpa Ralph? A Unitarian minister in his young adulthood, we have counted him as nearly a saint and he is used to justify selfishness?

I looked into Emerson's "Self Reliance," and realized that this poetic, quirky, anarchic essay is not encouraging isolation at all, but vibrant human relationships. Emerson was sort of the George Carlin of his age. He favored intense interaction based on a confident, enthusiastic search for truth. He said we should resonate with those who speak their truths forthrightly and force others to face reason and innovation.

But Emerson also said, "A false consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds." He cannot be narrowed and cramped into the Self as god above all others. He can be appreciated as radically disregarding institutions—government, religion, convention-- that constrict an individual's true purpose with pretense and self-satisfaction. Instead, Emerson asks us to focus on enlivening new ideas, hopes and challenging expectations. Therefore, let us own Emerson as telling us to listen to the best minds in epidemiology so that we do not disregard our health or that of others. Let us reason out how Covid-19 can be best fought and defeated. We have to

think through how we will stay safe, despite self-interested politicians or businessmen who would expose us, our loved ones, and our community to danger. We are ALL in this together as a society, and just as it seemed odd or peculiar a month ago to wear a mask and gloves, so we may need to make more adjustments in the future. We may need to require of others that they fully respect our safety needs. That is true self-reliance.

As Anita Chandra (the RAND disaster researcher) noted, ““What matters in terms of disaster response and recovery is community connections and social cohesion.”” (Rogers, Adam, “The Science Behind Home Disaster Preparedness Kits Is a Disaster,” WIRED, 9/28/2018) How do we develop within ourselves the strength of character that calms us in a crisis, and the connections with others that strengthen society?

In terms of inner strength, I’ll simply mention that meditation is a way to limit stress. There are many forms of meditation that help us let go of anxiety and focus our minds. There are hundreds of apps, like Mindfulness and Insight Timer that will guide you. My only caution: don’t think you can’t do it. Paradoxically, everyone can meditate because it is just about not thinking too much. As one authority put it—just be prepared to waste 20 minutes and you’ll do fine. That works.

The intersection of inner mental and physical strength is exercise. If I sit around too much, I get stale. I have been running for 40 years and zipping around the Rockefeller Preserve for 25 years. Attendance has lately increased 68% at Rockefeller, so go very early or late, go anywhere, but get out there and move! Or dance. Or follow the online yoga and fitness gurus. Make things up! Have some fun! For example, on Easter, our family members —from our

geographically scattered isolations—each contributed a little show to our Easter zoom meeting. Our granddaughter stood on her head, and our son-in-law modeled his collection of many hats for different purposes. Sarita, Blanca, and I did a two-minute free-dance to the Beach Boys' "I Get Around" that surely reached a pinnacle of silliness, weirdness, and fun. Have fun when you move and you will be the embodiment of self-reliance. As Emerson wrote: "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim."

And finally, there is community caring and interaction. The research supports that a crisis does not stimulate anarchy and self-interest, but generosity. Joshua Greene, in MORAL TRIBES, reported that 80% of people, if asked for a handout, will give it. In my neighborhood, people started calling and texting when they went to the supermarket, asking if someone needed anything. An elderly neighbor on a fixed income gave us hundreds of dollars to anonymously support an impoverished father and his 10-year-old son. A local pastor in Hastings bought diapers for a family in White Plains. Someone donated \$5,000 to the lone supermarket in Provincetown, Mass for the early Saturday senior shopping period to distribute free groceries. And so on. Is there a tendency to slack off as the weeks GO ON? Yes, of course, but that is where the encouragement of community to higher values comes into play.

This ought to land in our wheelhouse. Out of idle curiosity, I consulted "HOW TO BE A PERFECT STRANGER, a Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies" to see what it said about Unitarian Universalists:

"Some services are formal, but others are marked by applause or a dialogue between congregants and whoever is speaking from the pulpit. But whatever the style, the community

remains the locus of the holy. Unitarian Universalists recognize the power of solitude and personal devotion, but they worship together for the strength gained from the presence and wisdom of others.” (HPS, vol.2, pg. 352)

I like that phrase, “strength gained from the presence and wisdom of others.” Perhaps you are thinking that nobody’s perfect. Perhaps you appreciate that any one of us might fail in generosity. However, they may be too financially stressed, horribly ill, or traumatized to care about others. Therefore, as we pursue truth here, we learn to express generosity to people who appear to defy self-isolation or ignorantly more interested in financial stability than health. They may be generally frightened people; they may be currently panicked about not working; they may see their retirement vanishing. Let’s not make it worse. We can teach others by example. We can maintain our own tranquility by remembering our value of tolerance. If “the community remains the locus of the holy” it is because we get strength and wisdom here. We can refuse to make society worse. We can give our love to those who need it.

OK, that does sound “preachy.” This is what your mother may have told you too many times. I know that. And so I’ll double down.

I know, from my clinical work, that people who have been badly traumatized cannot get too much comfort, because they have not had enough sweet love. People who have experienced great stress increasingly develop more and more nerve stress receptors, which makes them highly sensitive to stress. They are easily triggered to panic, because they feel vulnerable very readily, but their nerve receptors for comfort are comparatively few. Some of

the people we see around us have been traumatized; some of us are being traumatized right now in our isolation and our dread.

However, we gather to give each other the feeling that comes from being understood as fragile and yet earnest seekers of truth. We do better through receiving—and giving—understanding. The emptiness of fear and loss is here counterbalanced by spiritual fullness. This congregation has a Caring Committee for when you are down to your last can of beans; we can all consult with Viola during tough times in the next several months. We have a permanent Pastoral Care Committee so that if you call me in great distress I will refer you to a skilled volunteer who meets with you several times about your feelings and options. There is comfort in being understood; there is also comfort in being understanding. The generosity we express by our presence—together—is healing in and of itself. This is the community where we can speak of our sorrows and hopes, our commitments and triumphs. The candles of joy and concern, the simple gathering together, the discussion after the sermon, are just a few of the elements constituting an implicit empathy available to everyone who shows up. Spiritual practices of mindfulness and self-care energize generosity. Social and spiritual connection feeds generosity. Generosity creates hope. That's what works.