



Your Story
MATTERS

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Columnist

Holding on to empathy in a time of self-preservation

As I write this I am sitting in a cabin alongside the Metolius River in Camp Sherman. The only sound is the trickling of water just beyond the back porch. I am writing on a note pad because there is no phone or internet and my laptop is dead. There is a fire, food in the antiquated fridge, and a claw-foot tub where I plan on spending a good portion of my evening reading a book about survival in Alaska. I am theoretically supposed to depart tomorrow, but my introvert self is pondering how I might negotiate a longer stay.

Part of my job as a mental health professional is navigating crisis. To some extent, I encounter crises of varying severity on a near daily basis. Domestic violence, suicide ideation, bankruptcy, psychosis, homelessness, and addiction to name a few. Not much surprises me anymore and I like to think I have become equipped at confronting crisis with concern while not letting the emotion of a situation overcome my judgment.

These other crises have not stopped being relevant, but the attention they receive, which is often too little, has been eclipsed by

the demands of COVID-19. This is not to say that COVID-19 does not deserve the spotlight, but many people are facing struggles more immediate than the threat of a virus. And what's worse, is that those struggles existing before we knew about COVID-19 may be even more amplified amid the widespread disruption.

And that leads me back to my present comforts of the cabin. It is not lost to me how so very privileged my position is. Crises tend to illuminate privilege and inequities. As much as I want to find solace in this place where denial comes easy, I thank my upbringing for making me question the ethics of my indulgence. There is little room for empathy in denial and I am reminded that self-preservation can coexist with compassion.

The disruption has given us all challenges. Some of us are used to dysfunction and chaos — COVID-19 might be just adding to the plate. Some of us resent canceled conferences, fundraisers, vacations, and sport games. Some of us are wondering how the bills will be paid. Some of us have to work even harder to find a meal, shelter, and warmth. It has triggered grief reactions for a lot of us — whether it was the game we didn't get to watch, the trip we didn't get to take, the family members we cannot see, or the support we can no longer access.

Beauty blooms when we can redirect our fear to gratitude, recognize our

privilege, and even in a place of social distancing find ways to connect and reach out to our community.

If you have a job that allows for remote work, a living wage, a healthy body, a younger body, supports at home, a safe home, and insurance you are in the minority and yes, you are privileged. Those of us that are lucky enough to be in such a position ought to be giving what we can, doing what we can, and advocating when we can.

Here are some things to consider:

- Reach out to older neighbors. Offer to buy groceries. Offer to help them with technology.
- Buy gift cards to your favorite restaurants you might not want to physically visit.
- Share toilet paper. Got lucky at Costco? Some folks are too afraid to walk out their door. And please, don't TP my yard — or anybody else's for that matter.
- Give to local food

banks. Don't want to give up food? Give money.

• Send a word of encouragement to healthcare workers and first responders. They are on the front lines and we owe them a lot of thanks.

• Please only share information that is factually based. If you don't know, do more due diligence and stop the spread of inaccuracies.

• Please remember nonprofits. Many nonprofits have had to forego annual fundraising events. Give more now if you can.

• Need a break? Get out in nature.

• Acknowledge your

privilege.

There are undoubtedly unknowns as we all navigate the complexities and challenges COVID-19 is forcing us to confront. What is for certain is that denial will not allow for progress. Self-preservation without empathy is letting fear win the day and progress born from fear is not nearly as sustainable as progress born from compassion. So please keep remembering to wash your hands...but please also remember your neighbor. And despite a bit of stubborn reluctance, I will depart from the cabin tomorrow. Stay safe.

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