

"Keeping Your Head in Troubling Times"

Summary: We usually think forward: what am I doing next? We also think backwards: the location of both memory and reason. And then there is thinking in the moment itself, considered contemplation or meditation. Then there are those moments that our minds "wander." The struggle is keeping all these modes in mind!

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READING

This is a reading from the British poet W. H. Auden's poem "September 1, 1939." That's the day the Nazis invaded Poland, beginning the Second World War. Auden was sitting in a bar in New York City. He wrote this:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

...

There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

INTRODUCTION

Thinking straight in tough times.

All my life, people who remembered the Second World War have said, "If only we could get together, like during the war."

Well, boy-howdy, here you go. We've got one.

For many of us, national emergencies are a new thing. Many of us remember 9/11, but the emergency was short lived and immediately diffused into ill-advised wars.

Large and long social dislocations have, fortunately, been rare in the United States. That's a function of privilege. It's also a thing of the past.

Panic. Hoarding. Black-marketing. Agoraphobia. Xenophobia. We've got it all going on just now.

My wife Theresa, who works for a school district, called the other day after she got off work—late—and said, "Society as we know it is crumbling, and it's difficult to pick up the pieces."

That about sums it up.

I'm reminded of Rudyard Kipling's poem "If:"

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs . . .

Why is it so hard to "keep your head" just now?

As Rev. Jim said last week, this sort of crisis is a magnifier.

How do we keep our heads?

ONE: Ancient Wisdom

Our theme for the month of March is Wisdom.

Today I want us to think about how to think wisely. We are in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. A national emergency has been declared. A state emergency has been declared. There's a lot of emergency. There's a lot of illness. There's a lot of stress. There's a lot a lotta.

What might be a wise response?

Catastrophizing isn't wise. Magical thinking isn't wise. Running around screaming "the sky is falling!" isn't wise. So, what is?

The simple-minded (if you will) picture of how the human brain works divides what's sometimes called the "lizard brain," or limbic system from the cortex, the part of the brain responsible for cognitive function—our rationality.

That picture is great for a thumbnail summary, but it's misleading as a way of understanding our thoughts. And it can lend credence to those quick-fixes out there. Fact is, what our brain does . . . our consciousness . . . is a product of a constant interaction between all the parts of our brains.

This fact, added to our more recent understanding of what "mind" is—which I talked about a couple of weeks ago—our "mind" is the product of emotion, perception, surroundings, memory, all coming at us at the same time.

Our brains are marvelous things and our minds are incredibly complex and our consciousness is a marvel. And all that wonder . . . can tell us to run and hide. Can tell us the sky is falling.

So, let's ponder how we ponder.

The way I imagine this isn't scientific. But it works for me. I call it "forward, backward, now, and wandering." If it works for you, great!

We usually think forward: what am I doing next? This is reaction mode. This is how we navigate the world. We use our perceptions. And we're ready to react if some danger comes along. We go around anticipating. What next?

My father, who had dementia, lost this ability. The last thing I ever did with him was lay carpet. He knew how to lay carpet. He'd done it many, many times. But this time, he

couldn't think of what to do next—there's a corner, we're going to have to trim the carpet, so, you get a tool . . . he had lost this ability. Therefore, he could no longer care for himself.

Thinking forward is our default way of thinking. And it's reactive.

We also think backwards: the location of both memory and reason. (Obviously, it's more complicated than that, but bear with me.) Thinking backwards is one of the places where wisdom comes from. A few weeks ago I told the story about the Norse god Odin giving his right eye to drink from the well of wisdom, and what he learned were the old stories and wise sayings. So . . . memory, history, and the deep wisdom of human stories. That's thinking backwards.

There's a technique sometimes called "walking back the cat." It's used to discover how accidents happened. It's used in counter-intelligence when analysts look at the decision of a foreign government and then study the intelligence concerning the lead-up to that decision. The technique often reveals dissension in a government over a particular policy, for example.

It's also part of the scientific method. If an experiment can't be reproduced, it's held in suspicion.

A good mechanic uses the same technique—you see what's actually broken, then trace how many factors could be involved, then you eliminate possibilities until you find the problem.

In the coronavirus outbreak, experts are looking at the history of pandemics; they are looking at models of how infection spreads; and looking at the results of quarantines and social distancing. Then, we have some idea about how the future is going to look.

That's about responding.

A third way of thinking is thinking now, in the moment itself, which is contemplation or meditation. Mindfulness.

The fact is that, actually, we always live only in the moment. We do time travel—we remember the past; we predict the future. But actually, we're always here, now. And remembering that can both calm anxiety; and help us realize that we don't have to act out of habit. We can change our responses.

Also, mindfulness in the moment can help us observe how our own minds work. That loud, chattering voice the many of us hear—that's not the center of ourselves. We can stop that chatter, or at least quiet it.

Then there are those moments that our minds "wander." That's where creativity and joy often occur . . .

The struggle is keeping all these modes in mind!

TWO: Now

How to think during the current crisis

First, we know how many people have been thinking: toilet paper! There's a shortage! Must buy all I can now!

Which is why there is a shortage. Fact is, toilet paper is a domestically produced commodity with a short supply chain. The average American household uses 100 rolls of toilet paper a year, or 8.3 rolls per month.

The psychology behind toilet paper hoarding appears to be that when people panic, they run to a store. Toilet paper is cheap, people feel like they're doing something, and so, they buy a lot. Which creates a shortage. Which creates hoarding behavior.

You can see how the "thinking forward" mechanism, the "react now!" mechanism can get triggered.

Business guru Seth Godin claims that we have three modes: "The easiest thing is to react. The second easiest thing is to respond. But the hardest thing is to initiate."

So, we see how "react" works: panic.

Then there's "respond." That's the logic part. What's logical given our present pandemic circumstances?

Firstly, this is a major social dislocation. As I mentioned earlier, these sorts of dislocations don't occur very often. The last major social dislocation in the United States was the Second World War. Before that, it was the Great Depression. Before

that it was the First World War and the Spanish Flu epidemic. So, we have some models to look at, even though they are barely in living memory.

We know that hoarding behavior and blackmarket behavior come with the territory during major social dislocations. Just look at some World War Two era posters. And notice that Attorney General Ellison promised to crack down on price gouging behavior. Comes with the territory in social dislocations.

You can read online about the measures that Minneapolis and St. Paul took during the Spanish Flu pandemic. Shutting down gatherings of people and limiting access to public transportation were two measures. It was too little too late, and something on the order of fifteen hundred people died of influenza in 1918 and 1919. The two cities did not coordinate their efforts. This time, the governor has stepped in. Good move.

I've always been interested in history. When I was a kid, I really wanted one of my grandfathers to have been in the First World War. Fact is, they were both drafted and went to bootcamp, where they contracted the Spanish Flu and were ill until after the war ended. They were both very happy they had contracted the flu—they preferred their chances with the flu to their chances making frontal assaults on machine guns.

One of the reasons the flu spread so quickly is that governments were moving large numbers of young people around, even when they were sick. Also, media outlets all over Europe were in propaganda mode. They didn't talk about deaths from disease. It's called the Spanish Flu because Spain was a neutral country in World War One, and so Spanish media actually reported what was happening.

Here in the US, the nation ground to a halt. But out of that experience came serious action and serious medical and scientific study concerning epidemiology. Collectively, we learned lessons that prevented another pandemic for more than a century. And it informs what we are doing today.

That's thinking backward. That's reason. That's now to respond.

So how do we what Seth Godin calls "the hardest thing"— initiate?

One way is thinking now. In the moment. Contemplation and meditation.

We quiet that voice that says "react, react, react!" We quiet that voice that says "respond, respond, respond!"

We quiet those imperatives and perceive what is going on, right now. We find stillness. And, suddenly, possibilities arise. New ways of seeing things. We think outside of that proverbial box.

One good question to ask yourself: What's my problem, right now?

I often discover, to my eternal amazement, that actually, nothing's wrong, right now. I'm merely worried. I'm merely attempting time travel. Which doesn't help anything or anybody . . .

In the now, we find the creativity and we innovate. We initiate.

Then there's that last mental state. One that can't be forced. That's the mind wandering. We can set up space for it. But we can't force it. But that's where the "aha!" moments come from. Albert Einstein on a street car, after hours of working on the problem, suddenly, aha! discovered the special theory of relativity.

Why are we so afraid of allowing our minds to wander? Try setting up times and means to allow your mind that space merely . . . to wander.

CONCLUSION:

It's a choice: react, respond, or initiate. What are you going to do?

We live in challenging times. The voices of conspiracies and superstitions have shown themselves for the hucksters they are. At this moment, dedicated and compassionate people all over the globe are joining together in this fight.

Back in 1939, poet W. H. Auden caught such a moment well:

Faces along the bar
 Cling to their average day:
 The lights must never go out,
 The music must always play . . .

What would happen if they didn't?

Lest we should see where we are,

Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

That was the feel of September 1, 1939. It's the feeling for many today.

But let us embrace rather than fear the naked truth. May we practice a wise fearlessness and an unconditional love; may we be a compassionate stillness in the chaos.

As Auden phrased it:

We must love one another or die.

Now as always: "We must love one another or die."

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"The easiest thing is to react. The second easiest thing is to respond. But the hardest thing is to initiate."

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