

## COVID-19 and the nurturing of our souls

Written by Dr. Rose Zacharias on June 18, 2020

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An awkward pause in our conversation in the ER team room and I am quickly embarrassed. My physician colleague swivels his chair away from the X-ray viewer and looks right at me, sets his stethoscope aside, eyebrows raised in startled uncertainty. I had posed my question with simple curiosity but his expression seemed to tell me I shouldn't have asked. We have three minutes together in a small shared space before one of us picks up the next chart, is approached by a nurse or is called overhead to a bedside. I am desperate for a genuine connection, discouraged by the business-as-usual attitude of my co-workers when nothing is "as usual." But maybe I have crossed a boundary? There are certain topics one doesn't bring up at work.

It's early days into the COVID-19 global pandemic and tension in our community hospital emergency department is very high. Our washed hands are chapped, face masks fogged up and any small talk other than the coronavirus seems absurdly out of place. I feel bold and I take a chance. I bring up the topic of God.

In my opinion this wasn't completely out of context. Earlier that shift, we had talked about taking care of ourselves. We were both runners, disappointed that the marathon we had been training for was cancelled. I wondered if he'd found a creative way to stay motivated. Both of us were advocates for physician wellness at our hospital and were familiar with the one in four statistic of physician burnout. Certainly, 25% of all physicians in Canada operating at high levels of exhaustion and cynicism is alarming and that was the number before the entire world stopped, pulled over and stared at the hospital emergency rooms. Now we were practising in a bubble and I was starting to wonder if I had what it took. He was nervous for his family, pregnant wife and young kids at home. My father-in-law had just been intubated in the ICU, despite no travel history, presumed COVID-pneumonia. Complaining about the absence of a race-day paled. There was nothing to compare our shared anxiety to.

Prior to the awkward pause in our conversation I had simply asked him if he was planning to pick up any extra shifts. A few of our colleagues were in self isolation so it was "all hands on deck." Ironically, many of us were reasonably keen to work as all March break vacation plans were cancelled.

"My wife is due any day, I was supposed to take next week off."

Silence. The pit in my stomach grew hollow. My colleague and friend with his generous heart and concern for others was so still and downcast. I suddenly felt frozen in place.

"How do you think this is all going to go?" I knew he had no idea how to answer me. We've worked together for 10 years and initiated various resiliency building experiences for our peers, but all the nutritious snacks and yoga retreats in the world were not going to solve this for us.

Last month we heard the hospital wanted to renovate our lounge. It seemed feeble then, it feels like an insult now. All of us need so much more.

Aware that that question couldn't help either of us, I added, "You know, I heard Sandy Buchman interviewed on CBC this morning. He talked about nurturing our bodies, minds and our souls during at a time like this."

"Right, he's the president of the CMA, right?" he said.

"Yea, so . . . hey Arif, what does that look like for you, the nurturing of your soul?" ('Arif' is not his real name.)

That's when it happened. The swivel of his chair, the stethoscope set aside.

The awkward pause.

I flash back to a comment he's made about driving an hour to attend his mosque. I think about my neighbourhood community church, a short walk from the hospital. Random thoughts about what his spiritual rhythm might look like, how he prays, what we might have in common, what might be different. I also think about my conservative Christian upbringing that smacks much more of judgment and bigotry than I want to admit. I think about how cool it would be to have a spiritual ally in my workplace and how a few of my church-going peers never discuss their faith. I know that my central faith-figure is Jesus. Where does Jesus fit into Islam again? I probably should know this. I have so many questions.

After that awkward pause, we fall into a cool little conversation about some logistics, his faith practice. He tells me that there are certain spiritual scholars in his community that are weighing in on the pandemic and he has found that helpful. He talks about wanting to keep the stress of the hospital at the hospital, in order to shield his wife from any extra concerns when he comes home. I mention that a big picture for me is that I believe I have been called by someone, for something bigger than myself and that nothing takes God by surprise. We both agree that the investments we have made into our spiritual selves will see us through this storm. In the context of our current chaos, I offer my definition of faith as "the unseen order of things" and he pauses, says "yes," and before he gets up to go, reaches for his stethoscope.

Later, at shift-end, after handing over a patient in progress to this same colleague, I say, "Thanks for the good chat," and that's all there is.

Something is different and good though, better.

I feel a deep need to bring my faith to work, however taboo it may be, because I think every other solution to staying well is going to fall short and I want to stay well. This conversation with my colleague was a wonderful one and I am grateful. Grateful for the nurturing of our souls.

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