

Psyche & Soul 19

COVID – 19: A TIME OF MASSIVE DISRUPTION

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

This weekend we shall reflect on the Covid-1- disruptions and their impact on health and happiness...

We are currently living through perhaps the worst crisis the global community has faced in the last 100 years, since the Spanish flu of 1918. Covid-19 has disrupted life on a massive scale.

I characterize this time with three phrases: *a time of unsettling disruption, a transformative time and a time for community and compassion.*

A TIME OF UNSETTLING DISRUPTION

The world as we knew it has disappeared. Established order has been replaced by unpredictability. Securities by uncertainty. Faith by doubt. These lead to a number of debilitating emotions – anxiety, fear, hopelessness. Covid-19 has exposed our vulnerabilities and revealed the fragility of life. We have witnessed the death of dear ones and colleagues. We ourselves live in dread of falling a prey to it. The pandemic has stripped away our illusions of safety and control. We are living in a time of unsettling disruption of life.

Unsettling Health Crisis

The disease itself has been very unsettling, not only for infected persons, but for most people. We are only gradually discovering the extent of harm the disease causes. And the scenario is alarming.

Covid-19 has transformed itself from a respiratory illness to a multi-systemic disease. It has caused cardiovascular and neurological problems and these are predicted to remain long after the supposed recovery. About one fifth of hospitalized Covid-19 patients have damage to their hearts, even if they never had cardiac issues before.

Neurological complications range from inflammation of the central nervous system, brain disease with delirium or psychosis, strokes and peripheral nerve problems.

The virus could leave a minority of the population with subtle brain damage that only becomes apparent in years to come.

There is also evidence that patients who recover from coronavirus infections may lose their immunity to reinfection within months. In one study, ninety days after treatment no detectable antibodies were in the bloodstream of most of the recovered patients.

Self-isolation, quarantine, lockdown, and loss of livelihoods have led to an increase in mental illness. Loneliness, anxiety, depression, insomnia, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicidal behavior, as also domestic violence, have increased.

Unsettling Economic Crisis

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on the global economy that is predicted to continue for years. The UN Trade and Development Report 2020 has forecast that 90 to 120 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty in the developing world, with close to 300 million facing food insecurity. In India, crores of people, especially daily wagers lost their jobs and many are still unemployed. Many small businesses have closed down. The World Bank and rating agencies have forecast a deep recession, predicted to be India's worst since independence.

Unsettling Ethical Crisis

The lack of medical equipment to treat the infected threw up unsettling ethical and moral challenges. We heard disturbing reports about medical professionals and families having to make difficult and painful decisions as to who gets to be saved, who was dispensable and could be left to die. We have seen images of total disregard for the dignity of people in death, the callous manner in which dead bodies have been disposed of.

While we hear of inspiring stories of courage and generosity we also hear disturbing stories of exploitation and callousness – unscrupulous and greedy people placing profit before public health, hoarding precious medical equipment and supplies or inflating prices making them unaffordable, leading to loss of lives.

We saw the height of selfishness - panic buying in which those who could afford emptied the store shelves of essential commodities to stock their kitchen cupboards with months of supplies depriving others of daily necessities.

Medical personnel who place their life on line daily at great sacrifice, have been ostracized and forced to stay away from their families and communities for fear they would be the carriers of the virus, and even harassed and attacked. Stigmatization, exclusion and harassment have also been experienced by people infected or suspected of having the virus.

Unsettling Social Crisis

Social distancing, a misnomer, has changed the way we relate to one another. Our social ties are fragmented. Social connections and gatherings that used to provide comfort, ease and stress release and rejuvenation, have been severely restricted. Number of people permitted at common worship, which provides us solace, comfort and support, is also severely limited.

Marriages are under severe strain. The lack of private time, time outside the home, and inability to see friends have caused tension in many marriages, driving people to seek extramarital affairs. It is predicted that as the pandemic abates, rate of divorce as well as extramarital affairs is going to rise further.

Children are deprived of in-person schooling. This will have a very negative impact not only on their intellectual development, but also on their social and emotional growth.

Covid-19 also laid bare the depth of structural iniquity that characterises our society. The lockdown enabled one class of people to luxuriate in the comfort of their home, passing time in superficial

ways of entertaining themselves, their shelves overflowing with comfort foods, while another was trudging along the highways, feet bleeding, bundles on their heads, babies at their hips, facing police harassment to boot, seeking food and shelter – struggling to survive. Haunting pictures of deprivation and death on the road have seared into our collective memory.

Unsettling Spiritual Crisis

The pandemic has thrown many of us in to a spiritual crisis. Our faith is shaken. We are forced to ask some very fundamental existential questions. Is there a God? What kind of a God would permit this catastrophe? Does God really care? Do our prayers have any value? The dogmas and doctrines of institutional religion are failing and our own prayers and devotion don't seem to offer comfort or consolation.

A Bleak Future?

What is further disconcerting and disorienting is the news that the researchers have predicted that every three years we are going to face a new pandemic, worse than the present one – all related to climate change -- which is going to create a permanent state of disruption and uncertainty. Worst of times is going to be prolonged, may be permanent.

For Introspection

- *As you look back over the period of Covid-19, what are the disruptions you have personally experienced and are continuing to experience?*
- *What has been the impact of these on you? How are you coping with these?*
- *Do any of the disruptions described in this column particularly unsettle you, disturb you? Which? Why and How?*

Prayer

There is story in the biblical Book of Genesis where the patriarch Jacob wrestles with God all through the night. May be you are also wrestling with God about the Covid-disruptions. You could read the passage (Genesis Chapter 32, 24-32) and stay with whatever the story evokes in you in the context of Covid 19 disruptions and spend some time in prayer, talking to God and listening to God..

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