

Small Group Ministry
Session Plan
What Does the Future Look Like?
Doug Rooks, UUCC Men's (Ellis McKeen) SGM, July 2020

Opening Words

We are not in wartime, but in some ways coronavirus resembles wartime, in that we are all profoundly affected by changes no one anticipated, and which no one can seem to control. "We are all in this together" is one way of saying that there are no draft exemptions in our current situation. The pandemic could lead to profound changes in human relationships, and even a sense of renewal, or to greater isolation, if that is the path we collectively choose.

Check-in, Sharing:

Topic/Activity:

Three approaches or focuses:

One approach to the pandemic is to withdraw from the world, stay home, and relate to the outside world through screens and social media. **Henry David Thoreau** sounds a cautionary note:

"Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail . . . *Simplify, simplify.*"
– *Walden: "Where I Lived, and What I Live For."*

Gianna Pomata, a retired professor at Johns Hopkins, from the Institute of the History of Medicine, lives in Bologna, Italy – the city state which was among the first to encounter the Black Death pandemic in 1348 – which killed about half the population. Italy was also an epicenter for COVID-19 earlier this year, the one country in Europe where coronavirus victims died untended, since the medical system had been overwhelmed.

Pomata, who taught most of her life in the United States, was interviewed by Lawrence Wright of the *New Yorker* for the July 20 issue, and had this to say:

"In Italy, the streets are crowded night and day. Our cities are medieval, made for a different way of life – not for cars but for people. To see them empty of people is so sad. . . ."

"Just as we have to send the Army to take coffins to crematories in other cities, as in Bergamo right now, in the Middle Ages they couldn't cope with so many dead. The bodies just piled up in the streets . . . I don't have an idyllic vision of the Middle Ages . . ."

"After the Black Death, nothing was the same. What I expect now is something as dramatic is going to happen, not so much in medicine but in economy and culture. Because of danger, there's this wonderful human response, which is to think in a new way . . ."

"On the one hand, the plague works as a kind of acid. On the other hand, people try to re-create ties and perhaps, *better ties.*"

Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the Maine Center for Disease Control & Prevention, offers an interpretation of what is happening to us based on the historical reality that we especially fear the unseen, and find ways to apportion blame on others we see as distant from ourselves. [See the article below describing his sermon, “Things Unseen” as well the video link: <https://portlandphoenix.me/maine-cdcs-dr-nirav-shah-public-policy-is-important-but-what-the-public-does-is-even-more-important/>]

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Many people report that balancing work and family life is harder than ever, despite remaining mostly at home. Is there a way to change the demands on individuals in our society so that both work and home are valued and rewarded?
- 2) For those who already spend much of their time at home, the pandemic presents special challenges. How can we maintain ties with family, friends and neighbors amid these unprecedented conditions?
- 3) Can Zoom take the place of in-person meetings and gatherings, and if so, what kind of face-to-face contact would you want to be preserved?
- 4) Does or can a pandemic really provide the opportunity to “re-create ties, and perhaps, *better ties*”?
- 5) In light of Nirav Shah’s prescription against intolerance (“not just education, but community,”) what could the communities of the 21st Century look like?

Checking out/Likes and Wishes: How was the session for you?

Closing words:

Nirav Shah asked all of those listening, “to examine your daily lives for those who may be unseen. To see those in your lives, who were there all along,” because “Faith, fundamentally, is the assurance of things hoped for, that same conviction of things not seen . . . When this is all over, what will be remembered are not the case counts, the positivity rates, or the policy choices. What we will remember is how we treated one another.”

“Things Unseen”

Nirav Shah was invited by the Unitarian Universalist Society of Bangor to provide a reflection for the church’s annual remembrance of Charles Howard – the 23-year old gay man attacked and killed at the State Street bridge in 1984 – which he did, in an 18-minute video, on Sunday, July 12, 2020.

Speaking from notes about “Things Unseen,” Shah – appearing without his familiar glasses – bound together the twin contagions of coronavirus and hatred.

He said, “In some cases it’s a virus, in others it’s someone sexual orientation, and how our reactions to what we cannot see can be motivated by misunderstanding and fear, rather than by compassion and community. In this time of coronavirus, this tendency is all the more insidious . . . Things like the virus are unnerving precisely because we cannot see them.”

Although he expects medicine to develop a coronavirus vaccine, “Sadly, there is no vaccine to temper the fear, xenophobia, and racism and their outbreaks.”

“Our society feels fragile” he said, and probed deeper into collective responses: “When we feel helpless in the face of the invisible, the temptation to turn against the most vulnerable among us, to blame someone visible, something seen, can be very great, and that pernicious temptation can spread much more quickly than the virus itself.”

He pointed to names – “Wuhan flu, Spanish influenza” – that Americans gave viruses they thought originated far away – but not those in our midst, such as AIDS, first reported in New York, or MRSA, in Boston.

Marginalized people are easily scapegoated, he said. Cholera, spread in the 19th century by American shipping, was blamed on Irish immigrants. As recently as 2003, Canadians of Chinese descent, suspected of causing the SARS epidemic, “were thrown out of their homes and businesses . . . In each case, people replaced what they couldn’t see, a virus, with what they could see: race.”

When Charlie Howard walked by the State Street bridge, his attackers “set out to extinguish what they could not see or understand . . . something they did not want to understand.” He added, “Just like COVID, misunderstanding, fear, intolerance, xenophobia and hate are all viruses, each more pathogenic than the last, and each is contagious.”

Just as “the opposite of poverty isn’t wealth, but dignity,” the answer for intolerance “is not just education, but community,” he said. “Those who are unseen are much easier to harm than those who are seen in their community.” He spoke of authoritarian regimes where even making eye contact with neighbors can be a form of resistance.

Shah asked those listening “to examine your daily lives for those who may be unseen. To see those in your lives, who were there all along,” because “faith, fundamentally, is the assurance of things hoped for, that same conviction of things not seen. . . . When this is all over, what will be remembered are not the case counts, the positivity rates, or the policy choices. What we will remember is how we treated one another.”

– Douglas Rooks, *Portland Phoenix*, July 22, 2020

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