Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Spirituality
Environment



Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, speaks remotely during the Senate Committee for Health, Education, Labor and Pensions hearing in Washington May 12. (CNS/Pool via Reuters/Win McNamee)



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Right after a few states began to "open up" and loosened social distancing restrictions and mandated mask wearing, I saw an interview with Dr. Anthony Fauci and television journalist Chris Cuomo on CNN. As I looked at Fauci, I was mesmerized by his countenance. He looked full of grief and at the same time with eyes of tender compassion.

I saw a man who understands the nature and the seriousness of this novel coronavirus in ways that surpass most of us. His experience, knowledge and empathy brought him to this place of embracing the enormity of the situation, the cost of the personal suffering, and the frailty of the human condition.

His grief revealed for me the pain of knowing what the potential devastation this virus poses for all the creatures of our planet while seeing much of his advice being overturned with the rush to get back to "normal." Nothing he can do will dissuade the U.S. president from having the country reopen regardless of whether places of business follow the guidelines to protect workers and consumers.

And yet, for many weeks, there Fauci has stood on stage during those press events, speaking what he knows to be factual about the pandemic regardless of the political consequences. He speaks truth to power directly and respectfully. His eyes communicate a power that emanates from one's convictions. They also convey an acceptance or acknowledgment that these truths are too difficult for some to hear as their own fears and needs drown out his words and warnings.

Fauci knows he will not be able to make the changes he sees as necessary but he will continue to do what he can do, say what he must say, so that his words, his wisdom can influence others and some things will change.

His image stays with me as I ponder how to "be" at this time.

How to be in such a way so that the grief of what I know and experience does not paralyze my capacity to speak my truth and act?

My grief is embodied in the increasing death tolls throughout the world and here in the United States. All the persons behind those numbers were living, loving, working human beings connected to families, friends and colleagues. The web of sorrow, tears and heartache crisscross the country as easily and as fast as the virus.

This grief is exacerbated for those of us who saw in the rush of "getting back to normal" an end run around on any attempt to have the conversation address the serious injustices within our economic and political systems — so that we can, in the words of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, "come back better." It is a conversation that, if we do not have it, places all of us and our planet in peril.

This grief of lost lives and lost opportunity can be numbing. One can feel helpless given the current divisive political climate. Yet, as Fauci seems to do, we need to embrace this grief without anger or judgment. We cannot let the grief become toxic and disempowering. We need to continue our work with compassionate eyes.

What is the work we are called to do?

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First, to share what we know and what we believe.

And what do we know as we begin to emerge from this first round of COVID-19?

- Everyone needs access to good, quality health care.
- The economic disparity must be rectified. The privileged few can no longer benefit from such unequal distribution of economic resources while the great majority with little access suffer disproportionately.
- Essential workers, many who are hourly workers, need to be valued and given a living wage.
- Dismissal of medical and scientific facts with self-serving partisan or religious rhetoric places both our economy and our health at risk.
- It is a false choice to pit public health against the health of the economy.

- No nation can respond to this kind of pandemic without collaboration with all nations and international organizations.
- The health of the planet needs to be addressed as we continue to learn that climate change's threat increases our vulnerability for future global crises because of how it affects the availability of water for consumption, food production, personal hygiene and medical care, including for infectious disease.

And what do we believe, who interpret this experience through the lens of faith?

- Every person is a child of God deserving of respect.
- The right to life is a right throughout one's life ensuring that one's basic human needs are met.
- Every being is connected to every other in the web of life.
- The common good of the society needs to be considered in relation to individual choices, especially in how decisions affect the most vulnerable in society.
- Science and faith are not in opposition to each other.
- We need to care for our Earth home, as the future health of the planet is the future health of all of its creatures — including humans.
- We are called to love one another as our self.

Within what we know and what we believe possible futures can emerge ...

Second, we need to act.

Theologian Sallie McFague talks about a specific kind of action in her book Blessed Are the Consumers, which reinforces the work that the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue is doing. She reminds us that words and concepts that suggest new models that change the basic assumptions people hold about the world are *action*.

She writes: "We live within the models we create, and when they control our actions in ways that are diminishing and destructive, we have the responsibility to suggest alternative models. ... We are fast destroying the planet by our actions taken within a false model."

As we emerge from this pandemic, we need to suggest alternative models so as to create a "better" future. To speak about seeing what is happening through new eyes, through a new model and from a new consciousness. We need to stand firm,

share our knowledge and beliefs, write them clearly to our family and friends, politicians and pastors — even when the opposite of what we are saying continues to get louder and angrier.

And it will.

We are responsible for the vision of our world that has been developing and evolving in us through our experience and within the deep silence of contemplation. It envisions that all of creation is interconnected. The survival and health of the human are intertwined with that of all creatures and Earth itself. Such a vision offers a new model. We must continue to offer it and try to live out of it.

And, like Fauci, we can hold the grief with eyes of compassion and love and continue to stay in the struggle, sharing what we know and what we believe.

[Nancy Sylvester is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Prior to that she was National Coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby. You may be interested in the current ICCD program, Enter the Chaos: Engage the Differences to Make a Difference. For information go to www.iccdinstitute.org.]