Voices of Sisters
Coronavirus
Social Justice



Clear view of mountain tops (Unsplash Victoire Joncheray)



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African Americans struggling for justice; parent and child refugees at our borders; migrants from South America working our fields; trees swaying in the wind; a magnificent rainbow; stars of night; thousands suffering, healing or dying from COVID-19 … while others watch a gorgeous sunset.

All are inter-connected to the infinite reach of the cosmic web of life. Hildegard of Bingen says, "Everything that is in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth is penetrated with connectedness, penetrated with relatedness" and embraced by the Divine. If only we could believe this reality — that we are all one and so deeply connected.

We have heard so much about social distancing these days during the pandemic: protecting ourselves while protecting all whom we encounter, including our sacred Earth. Our months of shelter-in-place have enabled our cosmos to begin to heal. People in New Delhi, India, saw their beautiful blue sky and the Himalayan Mountain tops that have remained hidden under pollution for years. Many major cities have witnessed clear skies emerge from our consumeristic patterns of having more and consuming more with little regard for what impact this has on our cosmos.

During these times, we have been able to see the importance of being for each other, seeing how everything we do touches lives, witnessing how interconnected we are to all of life. The care and attention that we offer to one another is the same care that manifests itself in our respect for our Earth.

One of the powerful visual examples for me of this interconnectedness is a YouTube Thai commercial of a young man who is so attentive to every aspect of his life and encounters. Whether it is seeing a dying plant in need of water, assisting an elderly woman with her cart, feeding a hungry dog who visits his outdoor table at lunchtime, bringing bananas to an elderly woman, giving up his seat to a tired woman or giving money to help a mother and child begging for money for education: Each encounter tenders his heart and connects him to their needs.

These encounters bring life in so many different ways. Unexpected relationships are created, watered plants come back to life, a little girl dressed for school excitedly shares what she has learned with her mother. The commercial ends with "Believe in Good."

Advertisement

Leo Buscaglia said, "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

Living in the timeline of s*heltered in place* has given us more time to connect with family and community. It has opened our eyes to see things differently, maybe with more compassion, watching the changing of the seasons from our windows, giving more attention to our plants, playing with our children, praying for all peoples suffering the ravages of the pandemic. Each of these connections embrace the web of life and enable us to see how interconnected we all are.

The nightly news is helping us to see these connections also. After all the stories of COVID-19 with its successes and failures, the Black Lives Matter marches for justice worldwide, and the continuing climate crisis, the closing news segment is often a story of someone reaching out and doing something unexpected yet important for another person or family. As much as people were social distancing, love seemed to wrap around the corner and touch another person's life.

All the hospital personnel who had worked long hours and were emotionally spent still made time to be with patients who were dying and would not be there in the morning. Many nurses saw the great need to make one last connection with the patient's family. Those last words whispered to the dying family member were so important and etched on their hearts forever, all because an unknown stranger chose compassion and made the contact of a lifetime. Seeing that kindness, and the love of strangers helping strangers have a sense of dignity in their last moments, awakened my empathy for those I encounter on any given day.

During these days, I witnessed the hunger for encounter with families finding ways to be with loved ones in nursing homes. The simple need to touch: hands separated by glass but not by love; smiles on children's faces as they connected with their grandmother from a distance; birthday parties held outside the window at nursing homes. Balloons, streamers, party favors, and especially the smiles — set the tone for this encounter of needing to celebrate life amid the growing numbers of deaths. Each of these vignettes reminded me of the unbreakable desire to be for and with each other, and caused me to pause and recall gratefully the times of unencumbered celebrations that renewed my life and deepened relationships.

How will all these experiences of distancing and connection, blue skies and mountaintops, cries for justice and equality and the integrity of every person, become unforgettable, lived realities when the new normal returns? Will these months of family time, quiet time and reflection, reaching out to others, become vital realities in our new normal lives? Maybe we should go back and watch the Thai commercial and pay closer attention to the last line of the video … *Believe in Good.*

[Barbara Smith is an Adorer of the Blood of Christ. Her ministries have included work at Newman University in Wichita, Kansas, and parish ministry among the Navajo in Crownpoint, New Mexico. Called first to regional leadership and most recently congregational leadership in Rome, she is currently a member of the Community Life Team at the Ruma Center in Ruma, Illinois.]