

<https://healingthehealers.org/2020/03/lessons-from-ministry-in-the-midst-of-a-disaster-rev-matt-crebbin/>

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## **COVID-19 Resources**

Beloved Colleagues in Ministry,

This is a message I wish I didn't have to write. I do not want to know what I know. Because I learned my lessons about disaster ministry in one of the ugliest and horrific events that still resonates within my own soul, my local community and our nation. My teacher has been pain and heartache. My classroom has been a setting where complex traumatic grief has lived for the past seven plus years. It was on December 14, 2012 that I sat in a fire station next to Sandy Hook Elementary School and was called forth to minister as my community absorbed unimaginable devastation to heart, mind, body and soul.

Beloved colleagues, if you are like me; you were not trained for anything like this in Seminary. My journey as a pastor and human being has taught me some pretty difficult lessons about trauma and ministry. Though the coming disaster will be different than the one I experienced, there are a few things that I learned that I wished someone had told me beforehand. Perhaps some of these lessons will be helpful to you in the coming days, months, and years. If not, feel free to ignore what I am about to tell you.

This pandemic is a disaster. It is not like a school shooting or earthquake that often comes without warning. It is not like a hurricane which gives us just a bit of time for preparation but brings devastation quickly and then is over nearly as quickly allowing others from outside to come and assist us. This disaster has begun slowly but it is building exponentially and more than likely its devastation will be experienced on multiple levels for years and years to come. It is a disaster which will bring waves of individual and communal trauma that will reverberate within and beyond your own ministry. Already, many of us are learning new skills on the fly to create an "online church community." Yet, there is more that we will need to know in the coming days.

## Here are 5 Lessons I have learned from my own experience:

### Lesson 1.)

**You Are Going to Be a Hero – Don't get used to it.** For the most part, if you fulfill your role as a pastor, if you care for your people, if you organize your community as best you are able to respond to the exhaustive needs of the world around you – most of your people as well as many other community members will see you as a hero. **Don't take it personally.** The 'hero' worship that you experience has very little to do with you, and probably won't last. Indeed, there will be all kinds of heroes in the early days of this disaster. And yes, all of them should be honored. For the most part, people pull together, look fear and death and horror in the face and do the best they can to meet it with courage, compassion and love. But if we pastor beyond those early days, we will also be a part of the natural traumatic grief that pulls apart people's lives and causes many to look around for someone or something to be angry with – and that someone or something may end up being you – **don't take that personally either.**

### Lesson 2.)

**You are going to have a hard time taking care of yourself.** In the early days (maybe even now) you will put off doing the things that you generally know you need to do in order to be the best pastor and human being that you can be. You will be tempted to make a bargain with yourself by thinking: "I'll do that tomorrow" or "things will be better in another week or another month, I'll take care of myself and/or my most personal intimate relationships then". *In a disaster, that time you think you will have later – it never actually comes.* There is always more that you will be able to offer on the "altar of the good". By definition a disaster means that the resources of the community are overwhelmed. If you are not careful, you will offer up your very self – and even the well-being of your family and other intimate relationships – all in the name of the overwhelming need around you. Of course, if you end up sacrificing self and loved ones, there won't be much left of you to actually serve as the transforming representative of

God's love in the world. The "Altar of the Good" will willingly take anything and everything that you have to offer. Do not surrender to the temptation of believing that God needs your own personal destruction to save the world. It's not only bad personal self-care, it is bad public theology.

### **Lesson 3.)**

**You'll need to Focus More on Purpose Than Meaning** One of the mistakes many faith leaders make in the midst of a disaster and in the days and months following is: "I have been called to make meaning out of the chaos." We are the local theologians after all. In general, this is not what people need most. After the Sandy Hook Shooting, the only people who asked me, "Where was God in the midst of this?" were reporters. People living in the midst of the chaos of a disaster do not have the ability and energy required to get their heads around the "meaning of it all". What they desperately need is a purpose. This is at least one small blessing of what is happening right now for many of our people. They are being asked to practice social distancing, to alter daily routines for the sake of a higher purpose. Of course, this comes with great anxiety and grief – as well as real economic and physical hardship for many. Affirm to your people that what they are doing with their social distancing is a profound calling – a holy task of love. Also, what many people will be looking for in the coming days is a way to serve some greater purpose in the midst of the chaos.

You have the opportunity to help your community in the days ahead by creatively finding ways for people to make a difference – even in the midst of their isolation. One simple way: don't just offer prayers for your people, ask them to pray for you and for others – and tell them what a difference it makes. Identify needs in your community and invite your people to contribute. Is there a toilet paper shortage? Invite everyone to tithe from their supply. Is shopping a concern for older members? Help set up a way for other members who are willing to shop to go to the store for them (Doing all this in a manner that is informed by the best social distancing practices) If people are buying items (Even older members) invite them to purchase items for your local food bank and set up a way to collect or drop off supplies that is safe. Call your knitters to their yarn and needles to begin making prayer shawls. Then, as you find out about those families in your area who have loved ones who are sick or have died, you can get

a prayer shawl to them. Invite your children to make cards for emergency and medical personnel in and beyond your church. I'm sure that there will be all kinds of identifiable needs that arise within and beyond your local community. One note of caution about this: Don't do things that end up contributing to the "disaster within the disaster." Sometimes people collect or do things in the midst of a disaster that they think will be helpful but end up stretching already critical resources even more. After the Sandy Hook shooting, we received thousands of stuffed animals that people had sent from across the country. The toys filled up two full Sunday school classrooms at our church and we had real problems figuring out what to do with them. So use your creativity and good judgement – but find ways to give people a purpose.

## **Lesson 4.)**

**You'll need to Use the Body to Calm the Mind** One of the things that many of us either do not know or often forget about trauma is that it changes how our brains work. A number of studies also suggest that prolonged anxiety and stress also affect people in similar ways. To oversimplify a very complex subject, there is a part of the brain called the Amygdala which activates the "fight or flight" response and stores emotional and threat related memories. It can take over and overwhelm other cognitive brain functions during times of bodily threat. This is actually a way that enabled our ancient human ancestors to survive in a dangerous world. However, often when people experience trauma or sustained periods of stress and anxiety, the Amygdala continues to be the driver of the brain instead of the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC). The PFC is that part of the brain that regulates attention and awareness, makes decisions, determines meaning and emotional significance etc. This is why when you minister to people around a time of death or loss, many of them will tell you that they can't remember what you said to them. That's because their cognitive functioning had been compromised.

What does this mean for your ministry during this time? First don't assume people are going to be making good, thought-out decisions within your church. And don't take it personally. Second, in general you are not going to help calm people by simply telling them to "be calm". You have to find ways to encourage

your community to use their bodies to calm their minds. There are all kinds of ways to do this but here is a general list: Walking, Yoga, Tai chi, Dancing, Breathing Techniques, Meditation, Prayer, and Mindfulness Training. You are probably familiar with a number of these techniques as well as others – if not, find more info. If you have Yoga teachers in your community or dance instructors or others see if they might record a class or two for you (Pay them if your church can afford to – many of them are facing a loss of income). Introduce the idea and concepts to your people and send the class out as a link. Or find online sources of various classes by others outside of your community and use those.

## **Lesson 5.)**

**You'll Need to be a Storyteller** While people in the midst of trauma are often not looking for the “meaning of it all”, they are aching for a sense of belonging. We human beings have an innate desire to have our own personal story be a part of a much larger story. That’s why we have been telling stories of all kinds around campfires and cathedrals for thousands of years. Remember Israel wrote down the stories of the Exodus struggle and shared it while they were living in exile in Babylon. The story of Exodus is not pretty – it is filled with all kinds of human failure and folly. But it sustained a people during their time of dislocation. Already, I have noticed an uptick in all kinds of storytelling taking place during this time. We human beings often have good instincts about what we need. My friends, you’ve got this! This is a part of what you have been training for your entire ministry. Our faiths have been sharing grand narratives about life and death, suffering and joy, despair and hope for centuries. The key in this moment is that we should not think that we are called to offer only “and they lived happily ever after” versions of our narratives. My particular faith tradition has stories filled with honest laments and frightful acts of horror. It tells of all kinds of people – some filled with fear and some filled with faith – and some filled with both at the same time. The story is often brutally honest about what it is like to be lost and then be found. It pulls no punches about the ugliness or the beauty that is a part of our common humanity.

Beloved colleagues: share the story that has been entrusted to you – embrace all of it, and allow it to speak the truth needed for this moment. Our people need

authentic storytellers who can help them experience what it is like to be held by something greater than their minds and hearts can comprehend in this moment. They need to know that they are a part of a story that will hold them even in the midst of their most anxious moments – including their most bloodcurdling screams. My Christian tradition has a story that currently sets us in the midst of Lent – a time of wilderness and struggle – when everything that we thought we had, and knew, and might have been, is taken away from us. Our story tells us that there is a cross on the path which will soon seem to overwhelm everything that we hold dear. But our story also tells us that there is more than that cross – and even more than the cave of death with a stone covering it. Our story speaks of a tomb that is empty. It speaks of love refusing to be buried by fear and life that will not be banished by death. I know our many other faith traditions hold out promise and possibility as well. Now may not be the time for us to shout about that part of the story. For now, may it whisper within the depths of our beings and remind us that we, who have been called to minister for such a time as this, are held in that grand story as well.

**For now Remember:** You are worthy of care. You have a purpose. Remember to breathe. And most of all remember – you are loved.

Grace and Peace,

**Rev. Matt Crebbin**

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