Angels of our Better Nature

Who sinned, the man born blind or his parents? That was the question the disciples asked Jesus in the gospel of John. In first century Palestine, the people were searching for answers; they wanted to find a cause-and-effect, a reason why someone would have such a debilitating health condition. Back then it was questioning why someone was born blind or had leprosy. Today it could just as easily be asking why we are going through the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am no stranger to facing death. 45 years ago, I was in a car accident that nearly claimed my life. Comatose for 19 days, I had a profound religious experience and touched the presence of God. “Death has a way of focusing the mind” my husband Lynn always says. And from that moment, I knew my life would be a journey of discernment of my call to the ministry. But then came breast cancer, melanoma, heart-valve replacement. Each and every diagnosis making me feel a little more vulnerable, but more connected than ever to other survivors, to the body of Christ.

During this time of “sheltering in place”, I have been re-reading Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*, and what a difference it makes when your entire state is faced with a potentially life-threatening illness. Becker maintains that the existential dilemma for humanity is simultaneously accepting our creatureliness and our divine nature (i.e., we are an animal who is self-conscious of its own death). And we spend most of our energy throughout life trying to avoid the reality of the limitations of our physicality (i.e., denying our own mortality). Thus we must constantly choose life in the face of death.
Most of us act as if we are invincible. We go through life avoiding our mortality, that is, until tragedy strikes. Then we are usually so self-absorbed, we only ask, “Why me?” Well, why not? Does your, or my, privileged social location mean that you, or I, are immune to the vicissitudes of life? Life’s tragedies can help us break through this shield of denial. I know facing death has helped “jar” me from complacency to appreciate life on a much deeper level and forced me to cherish my family, my health, all of nature.

If Becker’s synthesis of the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, science and religion is right and the main self-analytical problem of life is to become conscious of what one is doing to earn his/her feeling of heroism, then facing death can enable us to live more fully, to discover the meaning of our existence, our role, our responsibility in being co-creators.

As people of faith, we must take the seemingly meaningless situations in our lives and create places in which true human goodness, loving sympathy and compassionate self-sacrifice can occur. Dorothee Soelle calls this “soul-making” in her book Suffering. Soelle argues that “the origin of evil lies forever hidden within the mystery of finite freedom”. And soul-making happens precisely in the midst of suffering and evil, when we choose, in our brokenness, to turn our hearts to God who might seem absent in this time of pandemic.

Jesus came to give light and life to the blind man and healing to all those on the margins of society. Jesus offers radical inclusion and welcome to all—regardless of race, color, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. The divine spark within each one of us connects us all to the human race. What happens to one happens to us all. Let us all keep each other safe during this public health crisis, listening to our health care providers and using this time for acts of kindness to reveal the healing and compassionate work of the spirit of God.

Remember these words from the Hebrew Scriptures:

\[I \text{ have set before you, life and death, blessing and curse;}
Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants might live.—Deuteronomy 30:19b\]

We all have the responsibility to keep each other safe, it is how we love our neighbor as ourselves. Let us all summon the angels of our better nature during such a time as this.

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