

Being the Work: The Learnings and Spiritual Yearnings of These Times

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Might 2020 be a turning point in
the work of societal and spiritual transformation?

We live in a time of spiritual transformation. People across cultures, generations, and ways of life seek deeper meaning and purpose for themselves and a world where everyone flourishes. This was my thinking prior to COVID-19. The pandemic has not changed that spiritual yearning but intensified it and mainstreamed both personal spiritual work and the awareness of pervasive social inequities. In 2020 we face a unique moment, a possible turning point in the work of transformation, as growing numbers of people embrace spiritual supports and social change.

The work of spiritual transformation is urgent in our times — before, during, and after COVID-19 — as modern life continues eroding the planet and the lives of the vulnerable. For decades we have known about our disconnection from one another and the natural world, sometimes dimly aware of the need to do our part yet often overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems. The pandemic may be another symptom but also an invitation: How does this time offer an opportunity to live into new ways of being? How are we called to embody our hopes for a different world? The Coronavirus Era may be inviting us to consider anew shifts in what we value and how

we spiritually ground ourselves to live out the work of transformation. The survival of humanity and the natural world is at stake, and the emerging solutions are rooted in individual and collective spiritual change.

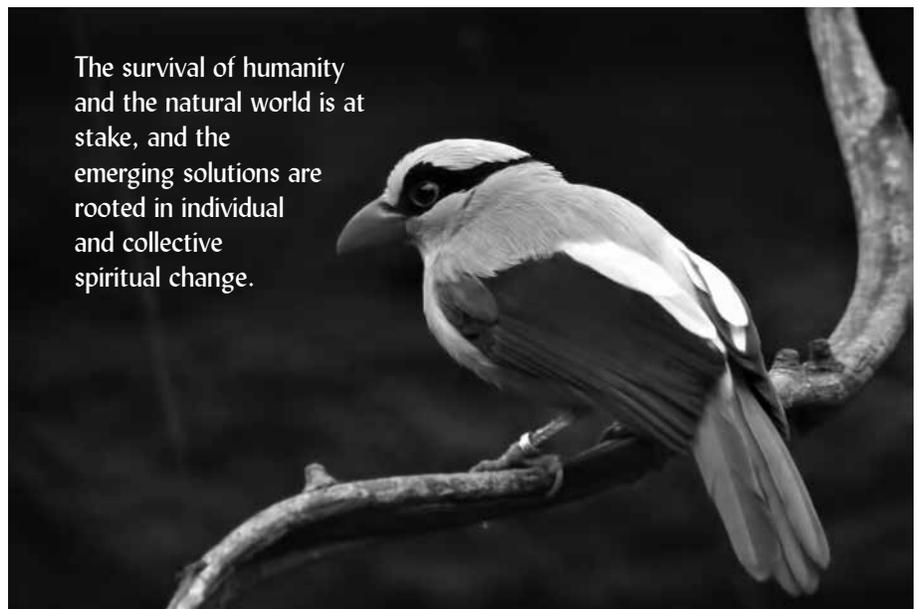
Pandemic Highlights Pervasive Inequity

When COVID-19 shuttered workplaces around the world and many people stayed home, existing social divides quickly became more obvious: sheltering in place is a privilege available only to

some of us. Medical personnel and first responders on the frontlines of the pandemic were quickly recognized as heroes working for the good of all. Other heroes often went unnoticed, stocking grocery shelves, working the drugstore checkout, climbing poles to keep our internet and other utilities functioning.

The economic divide came into stark relief for me when I headed out to stock up on supplies so I could limit my trips outside the house. While I sincerely thanked the people who were working,

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I also felt a nagging discomfort with my privilege. In one afternoon, I spent the equivalent of a week’s pay for an hourly employee. Many people staffing essential businesses were low-income workers and other people living at the margins, risking their lives for a paycheck while I worked online at home.

Social media indicates that I am not the only one who noticed this division. Maybe the COVID-19 era is giving us a chance to envision something new, suggested by this quote seen in a neighborhood mural:

We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-Corona existence was not normal, other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment, one that fits all of humanity and nature. -- Sonya Renee Taylor [1]

The fraying of our natural world and our social fabric are not new problems; however, the pandemic offers us a new lens that is helping increase awareness of the pervasive inequities and environmental devastation wrought by modern human life. Everyone is excited about the dol-

phins in the Venice canals. Air travel that once seemed essential now obviously is not. We have a new permission to talk about divisive issues like carbon emissions, and we also have proof that some solutions actually lie within our reach.

The pandemic is showing us that transformation is possible in the face of seemingly intractable social problems as well as our own individual spiritual growth and change. The two are inextricably intertwined, and these times seem to offer new opportunities for both.

A Growing Spiritual Hunger

Among those privileged to shelter in place, quite a few of us have turned to spiritual supports for comfort; it turns out that staying home all day every day is not always easy, and cultivating spiritual strengths can help build resilience. The website *Spirituality & Practice* [2] offers a diversity of resources, and the extensive site has seen a 25% uptick in visits since the pandemic began. People hunger for spirituality, and

this time of crisis seems to intensify that hunger.

Humanity has been moving in this direction for some time, as shown by the religious trends since the late 20th century. Increasing numbers of people across different countries and cultures see themselves as spiritual, yet choose not to affiliate with a religious tradition.[3]

Numerous studies document a decline in religious belief, practice, and affiliation. In the United States, more than one-fifth of the population and more than one-third of adults under age 30 do not belong to a religious tradition. As religious belonging declines, thousands of churches close every year and less than 20 percent of Americans attend religious services regularly.[4]

While religious affiliation continues to wane, interest in spirituality is flourishing, with people seeking meaning and belonging through a growing proliferation of practices — among the religious and the nonreligious — such as meditation, yoga, prayer, mindfulness, connecting with nature, artistic expression, and creating new forms of spiritual community. Among those not interested in formal religion, many across generations and cultures identify as “spiritual seekers,” following a deep longing to explore questions about the transcendent, belief, meaning-making, morality, growth, belonging, and community. These seekers are usually referred to as “nones” (meaning no religion) or “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). The movement away from religion is not just a growing trend but a new way of life that has taken shape over the past several decades.

The pandemic offers a unique lens on this new spiritual way of life. My friends at Sacred Design Lab [5] have named “accelerating spiritual trends during COVID,”[6] noting a marked increase in people trying new forms of spiritual practice, engaging in acts of service and outreach, and exploring virtual forms of

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community and religious life. Like the rising awareness of inequity previously noted, these times also offer us a new permission to talk about the spiritual and to engage in previously unfamiliar activities like prayer or meditation in the search for meaning, purpose, and something larger than ourselves. The Coronavirus Era could be mainstreaming the spiritual life.

**Individual and Collective Transformation:
The Call of this Moment**

COVID-19 has shone new light on the deep spiritual longings of contemporary people as well as on the pervasive inequities in our society. Spiritual yearning and social injustice are both ubiquitous, but how are the two connected? How do the hunger for spiritual growth and the awareness of social inequity intersect with and inform each other? The rise of both points to a collective calling to transform our lives, as individuals and as a society.

This call to spiritual transformation undergirds our work at the Fetzer Institute and our mission, helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world. Connecting the spiritual life with the life of service is core to the work, referred to in our founding documents as “transformation of self and society” and “integration of the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of service and action.” These words have a growing resonance with what we are learning from the pandemic.

The integration of inner life and outer life is expressed in various ways among different religions and cultures. Spiritual teachers across time and traditions recognize the importance of going within in order to come out into the world, which Quaker teacher Parker Palmer cites as the reason to do inner work. The Catholic tradition has clearly articulated social justice teachings—such as a preferen-

tial option for the poor and the innate dignity of each human being—with an ethical mandate to help people on the margins. Many Christians refer to this as “walking the talk,” finding deliberate ways to live out one’s values and religious beliefs. This concept is similar to the Jewish teaching of *tikkun olam*—“repair the world”—encouraging the faithful to engage in actions to heal the world around them so the beauty and harmony of the divine may become more apparent. Similarly, Engaged Buddhism seeks ways to apply the insights from spiritual practice to healing the world’s suffering and injustices.

Nearly all the religious and spiritual traditions also have clear teachings about caring for those who are vulnerable. For Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, and many others, helping people in need is a religious obligation, with sacred texts and teachings across millennia affirming that people at the margins are the divine image. All humans are reflections of the

divine, and helping those in need is helping God. Loving and serving those at the margins is a sacred responsibility.

What does this mean for us in the Coronavirus Era? We have a clear picture of who is most vulnerable: the high-risk groups and those most affected by the illness and its social fallout—people of color, young adults, those with chronic illness, people who are incarcerated, the elderly, migrants, hourly workers, people who are low income. We see the vulnerable, a first step in the call to love them.

Grounded in our inner spiritual work, we grow and transform, recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the centrality of loving one another. Mother Teresa called this oneness our belonging to one another: “Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time . . . this is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world.”[7] The spiritual path offers the opportunity for growing that contemplative heart, a way towards the transformation of self and society that is so critical in our times. A contemplative way of being can support us in living into this work of transformation, embodying the work itself, striving to live that which we seek. More than just



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being a good example, we are “being the work” by trying to live it. This spiritually-grounded way of living brings about the transformation for which we yearn by embodying it.

The time is now to deepen our work for individual and collective transformation. COVID-19 is highlighting more clearly than ever social inequities, spiritual yearning, and the hunger for a more loving world. This growing awareness equips us to respond and to invite others to join the movement, to be the work, with a depth of presence and compassionate connection. As we embody the work of transforming self and society, we glimpse the possibility of a world where everyone flourishes.

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Endnotes

1. Sally Z. Hare, “Hope. We are the Ones, Facebook Mobile Uploads,” Facebook, May 3, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157615901433208&set=a.10152229875413208&type=3&theater>
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