

Mindfulness in the Time of Covid-19

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While planet Earth is temporarily benefitting from less pollution, humans are both benefitting and suffering. There has been a huge amount of loss: life, work, money, shelter. While many people are climbing the walls during shelter-in-place, others are appreciating it to the point of calling it ‘sheltering-in-grace.’ Slowing down has enabled many to relax, reflect and re-evaluate their life and priorities. Covid-19 has prompted millions to assess the impact on our personal lives, community, state, country and world. Realizations range from painful (angst, anger, despair) to valuable insights about how to contribute to the preservation of our magnificent planet.

The following is a range of changes taking place and suggestions of what you can do to adapt.

The End of Life

As an elder and hospice caregiver, I am painfully aware of the grief of people worldwide who were/are unable to visit a parent, sibling or child in a care facility or hospital. When my friend Jill died recently of brain cancer, her husband, children, grandchildren and mother were able to be with her. She was in the hospital when she was informed that the treatment wasn’t working. She signed up with hospice and went home. Her mother, who lives in an assisted living residence nearby, was given permission to visit Jill if she self-quarantined for two weeks after.

Having a chance to be with someone—in person or virtually—and express our feelings helps us accept that a loved one is dying and to release them. At times when the dying hear, “Don’t worry about me. You can let go when you’re ready. I’ll be all right. I love you,” relieves them from the need to struggle to stay alive. Receiving ‘permission’ to die and the reassurance that those left behind will be all right helps them surrender to the dying process.

What was once a natural expectation—to be with a loved one during their final days and weeks of life—is still not possible in many places. It is a great loss for those who are unable to connect through eye contact and touch. Shortly before my mother died in 1993, she summoned all of her strength to lift her hand and touch mine, and then raise her arm to my shoulder and look deeply into my eyes. It was a poignant expression of love, especially since my mother was not a physically demonstrative person. This was her last chance to touch me and she reached out in this precious way to express her love.

The day before Jill died, her daughter, Liz, and grandchildren were playing on the porch of Jill’s house in Pennsylvania when Liz saw her grandfather on the porch. He crossed over six

months ago. Liz felt that he had come to say hello and to help his daughter to the other side. Liz said that her paternal grandmother (who Jill had cared for the last years of her life) had also appeared several times in the previous two weeks. Liz is not alone in seeing her deceased loved ones. Many religious traditions believe that deceased family members come to help us transition.

Later that night as I was preparing for bed in California, a subtle yet clear feeling came over me that Jill's time to pass had come. It was confirmed the next morning. I thought of Jill several times that day but it wasn't until I quieted my mind and tuned-in to her that I 'saw' her with her arms upraised saying, "I'm free, I'm free!" as she danced about.

Among the touching stories told during a Zoom gathering to honor Jill was her husband sharing that his courtship had involved great effort on Jill's part to get together and dance. For two years she had driven three hours round-trip four to five times a week so they could dance. When a family member asked what chapter I recommended reading in *The Art and Science of Caregiving*, I said the section on grief. It is important to give ourselves time to grieve and be present with every emotion that arises—to cry when we feel sad, express our anger when we get upset, and allow ourselves to feel joy when we remember our special connection with them.

One of many tragic consequences of the novel coronavirus is not being able to congregate at a funeral to mourn and pay tribute to a loved one. Gravesite burials are allowed in many places but the number of attendees is often limited to three.

Divisiveness: Good vs. Bad

The virus is impacting social media in a big way with many people trying to convince others that their opinion is the right one. The resulting polarity doesn't surprise me; either/or thinking is common in our society and culture. I was headed in that direction myself when I recalled a spontaneous experience I had twelve years ago. I was lying in bed awaiting sleep when I sensed a clear, conscious Divine force move towards my head from above. Pure energy entered my body through my crown chakra and moved downwards. I immediately became aware that everything above my head was pure Source energy. Once it penetrated my crown chakra, an 'energetic' division occurred and I saw things being separated into 'good' and 'bad.' The moment pure, unified energy enters the realm of human awareness it is subject to our interpretation, discernment and judgement. The experience made me realize how easily we judge others, events and experiences and thus perpetuate dualistic thinking — me and 'them.' This can lead to divisiveness, but it is also an opportunity to seek an inclusive understanding.

I have found that once we label something, it tends to lock us into a response mechanism in regards to that particular person, event, belief, etc. When we refrain from labeling, it helps us avoid grouping things into opposites, such as like/dislike, good/bad. In our culture, it requires training not to automatically categorize something as good or bad, but simply as 'being.' Letting things 'be' enables us to experience the divine, compassionate energy present in the universe.

Even if it only takes a second to label something, it is a diversion from the present moment in the continuous flow of life.

Finding Common Ground

As the Covid-19 crisis escalates and tensions mount, we can choose to be mindful of the way we behave when someone acts aggressively. Instead of fueling the fire with anger we can respond in a way that dissipates a potentially volatile situation, by being calm and centered. One thing that helps me when I strongly disagree with someone is to seek and find our common ground or experience. I ask myself, “Is there a way I can feel love for this person beyond his/her personality and preferences?” It leads me to discover that, Yes, I can: by finding this common ground/connection, compassion arises even for people with the most divergent views. We are indelibly connected through our shared humanity.

Transforming Challenges

The global crisis is beseeching us to nurture our inner and outer worlds. We can do this by learning to convert the challenges in life into pathways to healing. We can help our grief, fear and anxiety by acknowledging them and allowing ourselves to feel their depths. Being present with our emotions invites awareness and helps us move through them.

Fingerhold Practice

This practice helps calm our nervous system and deal with our emotions. Inspired by a Jin Shin Jyutsu practice, it involves holding each finger one-by-one. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, a meridian (channel of energy) runs through each finger like a wave of energy. Meridians are connected with an organ system and related emotions. Holding each finger while being aware of and feeling our breath helps restore physical and emotional balance, and to be calm and centered. This became a daily practice six years ago when I learned it from a Jin Shin Jyutsu practitioner to help my recovery from pneumonia.

The complete Fingerhold Practice can be learned from a JSJ practitioner. www.jsjinc.net A simplified version is to wrap each finger with the opposite hand and to hold it for two to five minutes. As you breathe in deeply, let any uncomfortable feelings and tension drain out of your finger. This can be particularly helpful for those experiencing fear, anxiety and sorrow because it induces a state of inner calm. Holding fingers is comforting and can be done on oneself or on another person.

For the lungs, holding the thumb helps diffuse grief, tears and feeling upset by nourishing and supporting the nervous and respiratory systems. In Chinese medicine the emotions associated with the lungs are sadness and grief. The lung meridian controls the breath and energy, and is also associated with clear thinking and openness to new ideas.

Consequences of Disregard for Nature

In the months prior to Covid-19, millions of acres of forests burned in Australia and the Amazon. Many people consider forests to be the lungs of our planet. We are an interconnected web of life; what we do to another, we do to ourselves. Blatant disregard for nature has led to exploitation of natural resources and animals and contamination of Earth's air, soil and water—needed for the survival of many life forms. Covid-19 causes a respiratory illness that can damage the lungs and lead to pneumonia, hypoxia (lack of sufficient oxygen in our tissues) and respiratory failure. Low oxygen levels can cause permanent damage to the brain, kidneys or heart. Breath is our connection to life—it is life-force (prana, qi, mana). Covid-19 can also cause an overactive immune response known as cytokine storm, prompting excessive blood clotting and neurological disorders such as strokes and seizures. More research is definitely needed.

Breathing Exercise

This simple exercise can improve the lungs' capacity and be an expression of gratitude for life. Breathe fully into your lower abdomen. As you breathe in, take into your being the fullness of life and the power of the breath. As you breathe out, extend your arms outwards and radiate love, healing and good will to all.

Concluding Thoughts

In essence, mindfulness helps us maintain equilibrium, embrace our loved ones and the dying process, and facilitate conflict resolution. I conclude with some reflections. Appreciation of earth's beauty and all the ways she supports us gives rise to gratitude, which is a source of joy. How can I more fully express my love and gratitude for our planet? How can I nurture hope in my life, community and world?

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