

Social Dislocation in the Time of Covid-19

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Without doubt, the outbreak of the Corona virus, Covid-19 has fractured layers of the social and economic fabrics of societies world-wide, notwithstanding the virus' effects upon the psyches of victims, the bereaved, and those who have yet to regain full health. While the onset of Covid-19 has clearly changed the patterns of American life since mid-March 2020, a study from the UN confirms significant social and economic impacts of COVID -19 worldwide. Indeed, the world's patterns of social interaction, business, regional and world-wide trade have been affected. At a macro level, the pandemic has disturbed the markets affecting banking, aviation, employment, trade and commodity prices in medical goods and global manufacturing. Covid-19 has presented unprecedented challenges in the tourism industry, as well as international postal services (UNCTAD, 2020) [1].

The social impact of Covid-19 is even more concerning. There are risks for agriculture and food security, migration in a time of travel restrictions, and the use of information and communications technologies. As Covid-19 impacts vulnerable populations that already experience social inequalities in housing, employment and general well-being, little or no attention is paid to human development. Pollution and waste forced displacement from housing, urban vulnerabilities register a "catastrophic" magnitude.

Additionally, since the outbreak of COVID-19, drug trafficking has increased, homicides and crime and gang violence have continued high, though fewer women are involved. In most of the world's countries more men are dying than women, who represent 70% of the paid care workers globally, that is, 740 million. Not surprisingly, violence against women and girls has intensified. COVID-19 is pushing 40 - 60 million people into extreme poverty. "With more people living close to the international poverty line, the developing world, low and middle-income countries will suffer the greatest consequences in terms of extreme poverty," [2] the UN study predicts.

Social dislocation

Along with the economic challenges of Covid-19, there are other serious consequences of the pandemic. One particular challenge, social dislocation, is a condition characterized by distress and confusion due to abrupt changes in lifestyle at home and at work. With the suddenness of the 9/11 attacks and the pervasiveness of the flu epidemic of 1918, Covid-19 continues as a silent agent of unpredictability and disruption.

The pandemic affects school systems and districts, where planned openings are postponed and sudden closures of facilities occur as infection rates rise and fall. And who knows how this constant disruption affects school-age children? In the US where millions of children have depended on school lunch programs, volunteers attempt to fill the gap. Families continue to face their loved ones' hospitalizations and/or loss of life due to COVID-19.

While small businesses and retail outlets struggle between openings and closures, jobs have been lost with the knock-on effect of loss of health insurance and the prospect of illnesses going undiagnosed and untreated. Since the arrival of Covid-19, citizens have been called to adjust to the loss of loved ones, the loss of personal health, agency, independence, living space, and for millions of people: their livelihoods.

Social desolation-An interior movement

The term “Social Desolation” emerged in the 1980’s describing an inner movement of loneliness, loss of hope, fear and grief in which people feel that there is no meaning, a sense that society is fractured and uncaring. In the 1990’s, culling from the work of Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, Peter Henriot, S.J., Belden Lane, and Dorothee Solle, Mary Ann Scofield [3], argued the importance of listening to and helping people probe their experiences of “impasse.” As Fitzgerald describes it, the impasse is a situation in which “every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill, and ironically, impasse is experienced not only in the problem itself, but also in any solution rationally attempted”.

Some people who sought spiritual direction in the ‘90’s experienced deep angst about world conditions. They felt complicit for participating in social structures and systems in which they no longer believed. “There will be an impasse,” as Belden Lane says, until “unconventional answers” jumpstart actions with greater purpose [4].

A paradigm based on the Psalms

In this Covid-19 era, Brueggemann’s reflections on the Psalms of Israel offer insight and consolation. He shows that loss of health, home, family, property and stability was a recurrent theme in the psalms and prophets. Sometimes Israelites were agents of their own unhappiness having forgotten or ignored God’s requests, that is: to respect other people’s lives and property and reverence their Maker. Sometimes, they were victims of politics and politicians. Quite often, they were just overpowered by imperialistic neighbors to the north, the south, and the east.

In their exile in Babylon, Israelites experienced themselves displaced, driven far from their land and customs. The psalms record their cries to God, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Ps. 137:4. These people went from an experience of relative security to a situation of painful disorientation. Precarious at best, they lost their livelihoods, customs, and ways of engaging almost overnight. They tasted the rawness of life and felt helplessly dislocated—a condition experienced by millions of people today. That the Israelites found themselves surprisingly reoriented [5] came through the edict of the Persian king, Cyrus. Hence Brueggemann’s paradigm: Security and stability give way to complete insecurity; but ultimately to a surprisingly profound re-orientation that restores lost hope and brings joy.

Ps. 126 expresses this unalloyed joy: “When the Lord brought back the Zion’s captives, we lived in a dream; then our mouths were filled with laughter and our lips with song” Ps. 126:1-2. However, instructive and hopeful, Brueggemann’s paradigm, cannot adequately express the depth of loss, dislocation and grief experienced by persons who have lived through world wars, surprise attacks, and/or the onset of a very powerful virus.

In a letter to his confreres, a Roman Catholic religious superior wrote in an unpublished letter to his congregation: “You may have already been informed that in the past two weeks, we have been hit hard: seven friars have died from COVID-19 infection...the last death occurred this morning. A cloud of sadness and helplessness hovers over us and darkens our hearts...Our greatest sorrow is not to have been able to accompany them at the time of their passage in the Life of Eternity by a word of comfort, of a song, a prayer or simply by holding their hand!” (May 16, 2020) [6]. Surely this is the experience of millions of people today.

What will be required to bring society to a new sense of equilibrium? Recovery is needed at all levels—in business, in industry, in health care, in education, civic and religious institutions, in social groupings and families. This begs the question: Will people take opportunities to talk about their Covid-19 experiences? Or will they shut down? Will they express their experiences through artistic means? Will they engage in individual or group therapy to lighten the burden of grief? Or, will forgetting be the modality of recovery, exacting a further painful price from victims and survivors? We have yet to see.

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