May 23, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a climate where even a pandemic can become a partisan issue, there is striking agreement about one thing; we all want our lives back. It occurs to me however that troubles are often the tools by which God fashions us for better things. [[1]](#footnote-1) The COVID-19 pandemic, and our responses to it, both past *and* future, offer a priceless opportunity to choose what *kind* of life it is that we want. And it seems to me that it would be a terrible waste of this pandemic crisis to rush headlong into reopening our commercial economy without also opening up our own spiritual economies.

The need for social distancing has perhaps made us more aware of how many people we encountered *before* COVID-19. Even if we did not necessarily realize it, we nevertheless brushed shoulders with hundreds of people on a daily basis. But how often, in our previously impatient and obsessed lives did we even *notice* them, let alone take advantage of the moments being created all around us? I suspect that one of the unspoken factors in the drive to “open our society,” is a subliminal awareness of how much we *need* each other and all these seemingly insignificant moments; especially in a time of crisis. Lauren Martin recounts a wonderful story about how a simple decision to slow down and seize the opportunity to cherish one another has an out-sized power to change lives. [[2]](#footnote-2)

A New York taxi driver arrived at his fare’s address and honked the horn. No one appeared. After waiting a few minutes, he honked again. Again, no one appeared. Since this was the last ride of his shift, he thought about just driving away. Instead, he put the car in park, walked up to the door and knocked. The driver could hear something being dragged across the floor, and heard an elderly woman’s frail voice say: *“Just a minute.”*

After a long pause, the door opened, and before him stood a small woman in her 90's. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1950's movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. Inside, the apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware. *“Would you carry my bag out to the car?”* she said.

The driver took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman. She took his arm and walked slowly with him toward the curb. She kept thanking him for his kindness. *“It's nothing*,” he told her*. 'I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother to be treated.'* When they got in the cab, she gave him an address and then asked, *“Could you drive through downtown?”* The driver quickly answered: *“It's not the shortest way.”* *“Oh, I don't mind,”* she said. *“I'm in no hurry, I'm on my way to a hospice.”*

He looked in the rear-view mirror, and saw her glistening eyes as she continued to explain in a soft voice, *“I don't have any family left, and the doctor says I don't have very long.”* The driver quietly reached over, shut off the meter, and asked, *“What route would you like me to take?”* For the next two hours, they drove through the city.

She showed him the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator, the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds, and a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she'd ask him to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing. Finally, at the first hint of dawn, she suddenly said, *“I'm tired. Let's go now.”* They drove in silence to the address she had given him.

After pulling up to a low building, the driver opened the trunk and handed the small suitcase over to the orderly who came for her. Reaching for her purse, the lady asked: *“How much do I owe you?”* Almost without thinking, he reached over, gave her a hug and said, *“Nothing.”*. She held him tightly, and said: *“You gave an old lady a moment of joy.”* Hearing the door close behind her after she entered the facility was like hearing the closing of a life.

The driver didn’t pick up any more fares, but he didn’t go home either. He drove aimlessly, lost in thought, wondering what would have happened if that lady had gotten an angry or impatient driver? What if he had refused to take the fare, or had driven away after only honking once? In the end, he came to wonder if he had ever done anything more important in his life.

I don’t know if this story is factual, but I do know it to be *true.* There is a Zulu word - *“Sawubona” –* which is loosely translated as *“hello,”* but which literally means *“I see you.”* How very astute that is! *Everyone* wants to be seen and understood, and that need becomes even more acute in a crisis. [[3]](#footnote-3) As our taxi-driver story illustrates, patience, and empathy are powerful healing tools that we can cultivate in order to truly see one another as individuals rather than as just a part of an anonymous sea of humanity. With them, Jesus saw us in our need and lovingly healed the crisis of our souls. And with them, we can bring our best selves forward to overcome this health crisis and heal our society

Grace and Peace,

Dr. Bob

1. Henry Ward Beecher [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. L. Martin, *Elite Daily,* December 30, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.theberylinstitute.org/blogpost/947424/342524/Empathy-in-Times-of-Crisis> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)