

## Is the Air Quality Good Today?

William P. Selig DMin Retired-BCC

February 2021

Association Of Professional Chaplains (APC) Forum, February 2021, Vol. 23 No. 2



Our four-year old granddaughter recently asked: "Is the air quality good today?" Living in California for the past year has been a wonderful experience in many ways despite dealing with wildfires, earthquakes, and now Covid-19, but most disheartening was to hear a four-year old expressing concern about the air quality. I can't help but wonder what spiritual impact the pandemic is having on our children, or everyone for that matter, as we walk together through this uncharted valley.

I recently reread M. Robert Mulholland's Invitation to a Journey: A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation. If every event of life is an experience in spiritual formation, then the year 2020 has made an indelible stamp on our nation's psyche and pushed us to find new and unexpected ways to cope and find meaning

and purpose in life.

What was normal is no longer normal; not the way we socialize, travel, work, or play. And for many, the new "normal" is bewildering. We feel like we've lost control over our lives. Whether talking to a patient in the ER, or conversing with a supermarket checker wearing a mask for 8 hours a day, Covid-19 has brought society to the category of a mass trauma.

Lately it seems like life is only about dealing with crises. Many ask about God's presence during this challenging period. It brings to mind a reflection I wrote on spiritual resilience based on my experience at a hospital in Washington DC. (APC Forum, Nov. 17, 2017.)

I recalled two of my key concerns. First, how to understand God's will for a patient versus mine? That there might be a difference was a revelation and often a harbinger of disappointment. Conversations with other chaplains helped me process and bridge this canyon. When patients ask for prayer, the CPE supervisor suggested, "It's better not to ask for healing; instead ask that the patient and family will find peace. We don't know God's will. Whatever happens – good or bad – God is there."

I felt that the takeaway, then and now, is that in the midst of a crisis, including the current pandemic, God's love for us never changes. It is the one unchanging constant. We are in God's hands, and as chaplains, our dutiful response is to model that level of unconditional love and support, whenever and wherever we can, regardless of the circumstances.

A second concern dealt with the issue of identity. When people become confused about life's purpose and question God's presence, a key mission of the chaplain is to remind them of their true identity. That true self is not as an injured person in the ER or an anxiety filled person wearing a mask and social distancing to the point of paranoia and fear. The chaplain is called to be a holy presence and an assurance that a person's identity is NOT tied to a dollar's piece of cloth covering their nose and mouth, but first and foremost, our identity and value lies in being members of God's family.

When I wrote about spiritual resilience three years ago, I was seeing illness and death everyday as a full-time chaplain. Today, as a retired volunteer chaplain, I don't have to go to the hospital to find and help people deal with tough times. The sad epiphany is that our nation is in desperate need of spiritual care, and in fact, our country has become one huge hospital.

Our granddaughter innocently asked the question – how is the air quality today, but chaplains face the larger question – how is the spiritual air quality today?

In the chaplain's toolbox is a key which can help unlock the door to everyone's inner sanctum and where the true self resides. Whether to the barista, supermarket worker, Walmart greeter, delivery driver, bank teller behind the plexiglass, or passerby on the street – when we share God's love, take the time to be present, give our undivided attention and heart to another – in other words, the door to their heart opens when the chaplain says: "You matter. You have value. You are not alone!"

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. lived and preached about identity, connection, and relating to one another with respect and love. He had already experienced a lifetime of emotional and spiritual traumas, yet, the day before his life was cut short, his dignity was intact, and his identity and calling clearly defined when he said:

"I just want to do God's Will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

Those words resonate in my heart. I believe we, as a people, will get to the promised land and that the wildfires and earthquakes in California too shall pass, and even the Covid-19 crisis. Chaplains need to be clear about value, identity, and calling. Our daily ministry companions others in their spiritual journey, offers encouragement and comfort, and reminds people of their true identity as members of God's family.

Whether in hospitals or standing in line at the supermarket, these are times of high stress and anxiety. We need to raise our spiritual antennas and meet people where they are at. Those masks may protect us from the virus, but they also hide our visible feelings and emotions. We need to constantly find ways to communicate by phone, music, Zoom, or some creative way. At every opportunity, we must do our best to validate people by being present, listening to their concerns and anxieties, and do whatever we can to make the air quality good today!

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William P. Selig, DMin, BCC is an adjunct faculty member in pastoral ministry at the Unification Theological Seminary in New York. He serves as a volunteer chaplain at the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital in Oakland, CA. Dr. Selig may be contacted at [w.selig@uts.edu](mailto:w.selig@uts.edu).

## Member Submission - Is the Air Quality Good Today?

by *William P. Selig DMin Retired-BCC*

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