

**The Transformative Power of Loss:  
Finding Community and Hope for All  
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Community and hope seem to be in short supply these days. Initial bursts of national unity in response to COVID-19 outbreaks in the U.S. have become seriously frayed, revealing for many, how splintered American life was even before the pandemic. Self-isolation and social distancing tear at the heart of community. Is a meaningful community even possible when we are unable to be there for each other at book clubs, weddings, or even funerals?

Hope for many also feels out of reach. As of the end of May, over 100,000 Americans had died from COVID-19, more than in the Vietnam War. A staggering one-third of Americans have experienced high levels of psychological distress during the crisis.<sup>1</sup> Over 40 million Americans have filed for unemployment benefits, the most since the Great Depression and roughly ¼ of the pre-COVID 19 work force.<sup>2</sup> Many who still do work have positions where they are vulnerable to COVID-19 exposure, and yet others struggle with disabilities or family situations that exacerbate the effect of the crisis.

The uncertainties inherent in a new pandemic can feel overwhelming. When will life return to “normal”? Will the new normal even resemble the way we used to live? How and when can we return to communal religious and social life and more regular economic life without unduly endangering vulnerable populations?

Just recounting the problems is discouraging. No wonder hope so often seems fleeting.

In developing the subtitle for this conference, “Finding Community and Hope,” I initially thought of how religious communities bring a sense of unity and hope to their members in times of crisis. But on reflection I’ve realized these gifts from religious practice and belief aren’t limited just to members of religious communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Keeter, “A third of Americans experienced high levels of psychological distress during the coronavirus outbreak” *Pew Research Center FactTank* (May 7, 2020). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/07/a-third-of-americans-experienced-high-levels-of-psychological-distress-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Over 40 Million U.S. Workers Filed for Unemployment Benefits Since Start of Pandemic” *New York Times* (May 28, 2020). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/us/coronavirus-live-updates.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage> (May 21, 2020); Heather Long & Andrew Van Dam, *U.S. unemployment rate soars to 14.7 percent, the worst since the Depression era*, *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/08/april-2020-jobs-report/>. “1000,000 and Counting,” *The Economist* (May 30, 2020), 17.

A wide variety of researchers have noted religion's significant contributions to civic life<sup>3</sup>, mental health,<sup>4</sup> family<sup>5</sup> and social stability,<sup>6</sup> care for the poor<sup>7</sup>, and community service and volunteerism.<sup>8</sup> The columnist George Will, who describes himself as an "amiable, low-voltage atheist,"<sup>9</sup> has argued "even those of us who are members of the growing cohort that the Pew survey calls 'nones,' even we — perhaps especially we — should wish continued vigor for the rich array of religious institutions that have leavened American life."<sup>10</sup>

The richness of religious experience and tradition brings some unique insights to bear as we seek to respond to and emerge from this current crisis.

But before that, I'd like to relate a short story that should resonate with all of us who have spent significant time in our homes the last few months.

In "The Bet" Anton Chekhov tells how a banker and a young lawyer make a bet that the lawyer can stay in isolation for fifteen years to the day. He is free to leave at any time, but if he leaves early, he fails to get the promised two million. As the story tells it,

It was agreed that for fifteen years he should not be free to cross the threshold of the lodge, to see human beings, to hear the human voice, or to receive letters and newspapers. . . . By the terms of the agreement, the only relations he could have with

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<sup>3</sup> See Corwin E. Smidt, et al., "Pews, Prayers, and Participation: Religion and Civic Responsibility in America," Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press (2008); Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us" New York: Simon & Schuster (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Brick Johnstone, et al., "Relationships Among Spirituality, Religious Practices, Personality Factors, and Health for Five Different Faith Traditions," 51 Journal of Religion and Health 1017–1041, 1035-1038 (2012), available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9615-8>.

<sup>5</sup> See Loren D. Marks and David C. Dollahite, Religion and Families: An Introduction (2016);

<sup>6</sup> See Monica Duffy Toft et al., "God's Century: Resurgent Religion in Global Politics," New York: W.W. Norton & Co. (2011); Brian Grim and Roger Finke, "The Price of Freedom Denied," New York: Cambridge University Press (2011); Philip Jenkins, "The Politics of Persecuted Religious Minorities," in Robert A. Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover, eds., "Religion and Security: The New Nexus in International Relations" (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 25-36.

<sup>7</sup> See I Mylek & P Nel, "Religion and Relief: The Role of Religion in Mobilizing Civil Society Against Global Poverty," Kōtuitui: 5 New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences 2, 81-97, 93-94 (Nov. 20, 2010) available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2010.519391>; Roger J. Nemeth and Donald A. Luidens, "The Religious Basis of Charitable Giving in America: A Social Capital Perspective," in Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good, ed. Corwin Smidt (2003), 107-120; Robert Wuthnow and Virginia A. Hodgkinson, Faith and Philanthropy in America (1990); Mark D. Regnerus et al., "Who Gives to the Poor? The Influence of Religious Tradition and Political Location on the Personal Generosity of Americans Toward the Poor," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 37, no. 3 (1999), 481-493; Arthur Brooks, "Who Really Cares," New York: Basic Books (2006) 34.

<sup>8</sup> See Joseph B. Johnston, "Religion and Volunteering Over the Adult Life Course," 52 Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 4, 733-752, 748-750 (Dec. 4, 2013) available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jssr.12065>; Arthur Brooks, "Who Really Cares," New York: Basic Books (2006) 34; Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us" New York: Simon & Schuster (2010) 445, 450.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Chotiner, "George Will, Tea Party Tory," The New Republic (Feb. 11, 2014), available at <https://newrepublic.com/article/116426/george-will-finds-his-wild-side>.

<sup>10</sup> George F. Will, Religion and the American Republic, 43 National Affairs (Spring 2020), available at <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/religion-and-the-american-republic>.

the outer world were by a little window made purposely for that object. He might have anything he wanted - books, music, wine, and so on - in any quantity he desired by writing an order, but could only receive them through the window.<sup>11</sup>

The nineteenth-century version of online shopping.

The first year, the lawyer “suffered severely from loneliness and depression. [T]he books he sent for were principally of a light character; novels with a complicated love plot, sensational and fantastic stories, and so on” – in other words, binging on “Tiger King.”

The lawyer then spends years cycling through reading classics, laying on his bed doing nothing but eating and drinking, playing music, studying foreign languages.

“Then after the tenth year, the prisoner sat immovably at the table and read nothing but the Gospel. It seemed strange to the banker that a man who in four years had mastered six hundred learned volumes should waste nearly a year over one thin book easy of comprehension. Theology and histories of religion followed the Gospels.”

In the final five years, the lawyer in solitary confinement seeks to learn broadly and intensively, reading Shakespeare, chemistry, philosophy, and more theology.

As the 15 years are about to expire, the banker, who has lost his money in wild speculations, decides to kill the lawyer to avoid paying out on the bet. The night before the bet is to be fulfilled, the banker comes into the lodge where the lawyer is staying. He creeps in, and finds the man, looking aged and pale with long hair and a shaggy beard. (Sounds familiar?)

The lawyer is asleep, but the banker reads the note he has written. The lawyer explains that after 15 years of studying earthly life, he realizes that others have “lost [their] reason and taken the wrong path.” He writes, “I marvel at you who exchange heaven for earth” and that “[t]o prove to you in action that I despise all you live by, I renounce the two million of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise. To deprive myself of the right to the money I shall go out from here five hours before the time fixed, and so break the compact ...”

“When the banker had read this he laid the page on the table, kissed the strange man on the head, and went out of the lodge, weeping.” When he hears the next day that the lawyer indeed left the house and broke the bet, the banker takes the lawyer’s note and locks it in his safe.

It’s a thought-provoking story; I first read it over 25 years ago and it’s stayed with me.

To me in mid-2020, though, the story prompts the question of how we let deprivation and loss change us. We’ve all faced loss in recent months – loss of loved ones, loss of employment, loss

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<sup>11</sup> Anton Chekhov, “The Bet,” available at <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Bet.shtml>.

of dreams, loss of hope and community. Can something come from this beyond the very real pain and grief we all have been experiencing? Can the loss somehow be transformative? How?

I think it's no surprise that over the past few months, international religious leaders, including President Russell M. Nelson of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Pope Francis, and Muslim leaders from the United Arab Emirates have called for worldwide interfaith fasting and prayers.<sup>12</sup>

Fasting is a practice that cuts across a wide variety of religious traditions: a self-imposed smaller loss, mirroring larger ones. While the significance and details of fasting vary from tradition to tradition, it is often connected with drawing closer to the divine, revelation, change and repentance, and care for the poor, in short, with loss and transformation.

Muslims worldwide, for example, recently completed Ramadan, a month of fasting from dawn to dusk. They focus on their connection to God and families, and by tradition are especially generous to the poor. I recently heard a Muslim intellectual also describe this as a time of revelation, recalling when Mohammed went into caves and received the Qur'an.

Jews celebrate Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year, by fasting. This is a day of repentance, of recognizing guilt. But as Rabbi Meir Soloveichik has commented, this is a hopeful doctrine, because "There is no guilt without freedom. . . . The very freedom that allows for guilt allows for change, for improvement."<sup>13</sup>

Many Christians, in memory of Christ's 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, celebrate a fasting period of Lent between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Pope Francis said, "Lent is a fitting time for self-denial; we would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our own poverty. Let us not forget that real poverty hurts: no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance. I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt."<sup>14</sup>

This only scratches the surface of understandings of fasting in these and other religious traditions. But there's a pattern that weaves across traditions: this period of loss and denial becomes sacred and transformative as those who fast look upward to the divine, move forward with hope, and then reach outward with love. Fasting, for the religious, is not merely celebrating hunger or some twisted love of misery. It is profoundly counterintuitive in the way that religious logic often is: we forgo necessities to gain something better, we abase ourselves in order to become holier, we lose our lives in order to save them. The loss that is fasting

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<sup>12</sup> Gerard O'Connell, "Pope Francis Joins Muslim leaders in Calling for World Day of Prayer to End the Coronavirus," *America: The Jesuit Review* (May 2, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Meir Soloveichik, *Sacred Time: A Journey Through the Holidays*, "Sacred Time 3: Yom Kippur – The Nature of Man," Video lecture, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKyKLV9TfeM&t=0s&index=11&list=PL6oZLDbtGHeUpRDFIGhcyxwh7rxRnmoH1>.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis (2014). "Lenten Message 2014" *L'Osservatore Romano* pp. 8, available at <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/lenen-message-2014-7624>.

becomes holy as those fasting seek revelation and transformation during the fast and then go forward with confidence and inspiration to bless others throughout the world.

As I compare this kind of consecrated fasting with how we can respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, let me be clear from the outset. I don't want to tell any one of you what you should be experiencing or how you should be processing your loss and grief. I love the quote: "Nothing is more barren, to one in agony, than pat answers which seem the unfeeling evasion of a distant spectator who 'never felt a wound.'"<sup>15</sup>

My point is not to offer pat answers. I wish I could offer a hug to those of you who are struggling today and sit and listen to you, cry with you, mourn with you, help you if I can.

But my point today is that there are resources available when we feel able to turn to them. Regardless of one's faith or lack thereof, the reservoirs of our community's faith traditions are sources we can all draw from.

This is why I care about religious freedom. I believe deeply that it is a public good belonging to believers and unbelievers, the faithful and the undecided. Not only does it give us all space to make decisions freely about the things that matter most in life and then live out those beliefs, but it also allows for the preservation of institutions and traditions that bless people of all faiths and no faith.

As I conclude, may I suggest that, like the transformative isolation of the lawyer in "The Bet" or the experience of believers in fasting, our national experience with the pandemic can also turn us upwards, move us forward, and cause us to reach outward.

Turning upwards, we can become people who care more deeply about things that are most important, valuing loving family relationships, time in nature, opportunities to learn and grow, and a fair and just nation. As a society, we can value civility, kindness, and decency, and we can choose to prioritize working together to solve difficult problems.

We can move forward from the deprivation of the pandemic with hope and confidence instead of fear, trusting in the goodness of others and God, supporting the best efforts of scientists, medical professionals, public health experts, and political leaders to work together civilly to hammer out reasonable solutions as the situation continues to develop. We can have confidence that working together, we can overcome this challenge as we have others in our nation's history.

Finally, the loss we have experienced can cause us to reach outwards, seeking to improve the lives of others, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

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<sup>15</sup> Truman Madsen, *Eternal Man* (2010).

As a national community, we also have a striking opportunity to seek revelation and insight on how we can transform for the better. Experts and pundits are already commenting on how society will change as a result of the COVID-19 crisis in fields such as health care, family life, the environment, technology, and education. We can and should be part of this discussion.

But each of us can also seek individual revelation and inspiration on how the crisis should change us. Will it change how we relate to and serve others in our family? Will it change our political discourse and priorities? Will it change how we use our time and resources?

The COVID-19 pandemic may be the end of the old “normal” and the loss of the familiar world we knew, but endings and loss provide unique opportunities for transformations and improvement. My hope is that as a nation and as individuals we can turn upwards with faith, move forward with hope, and reach outwards to others with pure love, building strong communities as we go.