

numa

caring for the spirit of viha

Pandemics and the Human Spirit

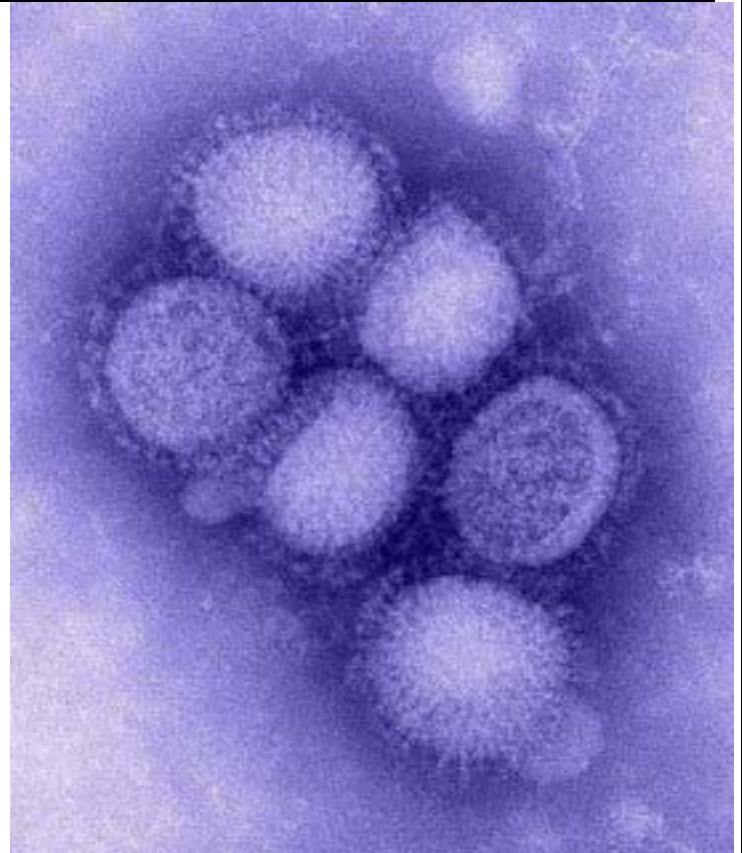
There's nothing like a pandemic to both draw the human family together and to tear it apart. The emergence of the HINI and the buzz surrounding it has drawn out the best and worst in people.

Recently while purchasing a morning coffee and muffin I handed the cashier my card for payment. Initially she reached for the card but then, as if something snapped in her brain, she abruptly pulled her hand away from the card, looked me in the eye and said, "Umm... You can swipe that *yourself*". I think I know what clicked in her brain. It was that primal instinct for self-preservation. The HINI virus has reminded us of the need to be vigilant in protecting ourselves. This instinct was powerfully seen when riders on a bus in Victoria insisted that a fellow passenger who was coughing be removed from the bus.

Naturally, a pandemic is nothing to sneeze at. Pandemics are serious business. But while it is true that the current situation has the power to pull us apart and make us wary of each other it also has the ability to draw us together and can teach us many things.

"'Tis healthy being sick
sometimes."

Henry David Thoreau



For starters pandemics can move us to appreciate our health and the need to take responsibility for our own health. The renewed emphasis on cleanliness can move us to understand that our health is really in our own hands. Our health is our responsibility. As well, the threat of HINI can move us to appreciate our relationships. The sheer thought of the ill effects of the HINI can remind us to embrace our loved ones and friends. Relationships become all the more precious with the thought that they might be strained due to illness.

A pandemic also makes us realize our vulnerability and our dependence on one another. One unique feature of the HINI is how it affects young people who are generally not as affected by influenza. This feature of the HINI challenges the assumption of youthful invulnerability.

We also realize just how dependant we are on one another for care. Our communities are dependant on health care workers to staff flu clinics and to care for them when ill. Healthcare workers are dependent on those who clean our facilities, design and make N95 masks and alcohol rubs. Again, it is during a pandemic that we can realize just how dependant we are on others for our welfare.

Lastly, it is often during challenging times that the capacity of the human spirit to care for one another is revealed. While some choose to hunker down and hide out from a pandemic others become very pro-active in taking care. Recently while getting fitted for the N95 mask I met such a person. As I sat in the little office with the big testing hood over my head waiting to get a taste of the bitrex she and I talked about H1N1 and how this pandemic was playing out in the hospital. She eventually shared that she was there on her day off to do mask fittings. It was so important to her that her colleagues be well protected that she would even do it on her own time.

Sometimes if someone does something dishonorable they will respond by saying – “What do you expect? I’m only human!” I wonder why we say such a thing after negative behaviors and not positive actions? When I think of this colleague who went the extra mile fitting her colleagues with the N95 mask I want to say, “What do you expect? She’s only human!”

D. Colyn

“Absence sharpens love,
presence strengthens it.”

English Proverb

Christmas Presence

One of the most important services of Spiritual Care is to be present with people in times of difficulty. Sometimes very few words are spoken but plenty of communication goes on. Chaplains are privileged to sit and be present with patients, families and staff as they face pain and loss. The importance of being present is captured in this brief reflection by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. It is entitled “A Place of Refuge” and can be found in her book “My Grandfather’s Blessings”.

Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us. Not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something

MRI of the Soul

oh to have such a thing.
to scan those hidden places.
to reveal where you’ve been hurt,
harmed,
crushed.

to make clear the course of care
to encourage,
hold,
challenge,
help,
forgive

but there is no such thing
and so we resort
to being still
to waiting
to gently speaking

so that what is stuck in those hidden places
might be loosed

beyond the moment, strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing. Silence is God's lap.

Many things grow the silence in us, among them simply growing older. We may then become more a refuge than a rescuer, a witness to the process of life and the wisdom of acceptance.

A highly skilled AIDS doctor once told me that she keeps a picture of her grandmother in her home and sits before it for a few minutes every day before she leaves for work. Her grandmother was an Italian-born woman who held her family close. Her wisdom was of the earth. Once when Louisa was very small, her kitten was killed in an accident. It was her first experience of death and she had been devastated. Her parents had encouraged her not to be sad, telling her that the kitten was in heaven now with God. Despite these assurances, she had not been comforted. She had prayed to God, asking him to give her kitten back. But God did not respond.

“Right at the depth of the human condition lies the longing for presence, the silent desire for communion.”

Brother Roger
Taize Community

In her anguish she had turned to her grandmother and asked, “Why?” Her grandmother had not told her that her kitten was in heaven as so many of the other adults had. Instead, she had simply held her and reminded her of the time when her grandfather had died. She, too, had prayed to God, but God had not brought Grandpa back. She did not know why. Louisa had turned into the soft warmth of her grandmother's shoulder then and sobbed.

When finally she was able to look up, she saw that her grandmother was crying as well.

Although her grandmother could not answer her question a great loneliness had gone and she felt

able to go on. All the assurances that Peaches was in heaven had not given her this strength or peace. “My grandmother was a lap, Rachel,” she told me, “a place of refuge. I know a great deal about AIDS, but what I really want to be for my patients is a lap. A place from which they can face what they have to face and not be alone.”

Taking refuge does not mean hiding from life. It means finding a place of strength, the capacity to live the life we have been given with greater courage and sometimes even with gratitude.

Happy Holidays!

From the VIHA Chaplains

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