

Update from the Protestant Chaplain: April 26, 2020

Easter 3A

Good morning!

At the heart of the swirling uncertainty in which we now live is an ongoing discussion about unknown unknowns. I have heard this term many times in many meetings this week. This phrase keeps coming up as colleges and universities around the country are trying to make decisions about what will follow the unexpected online spring semester: will there be a fall semester, will the fall semester be online or in person, when will the shelter-in place orders be rescinded? This phrase "unknown unknowns" has been credited to Donald Rumsfeld, who served as the Secretary of Defense under President Gerald Ford from 1975 to 1977 and under President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2006. This phrase, appears in his memoir, [Known and Unknown](#), (Sentinel, 2011):

"Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know."

Rumsfeld? I was surprised to even hear his name mentioned in relation to a phrase that is actually helpful for giving language to our present situation. The [reviews](#) of his book are not exactly kind, since he was one of the primary architects of the Iraq War that started in 2003 and officially has yet to end. But Rumsfeld seems to credit some of the mistakes related to the "war on terrorism" with making decisions without enough information. His book discussed the challenge of making decisions when there is not enough information to make decisions, especially when there is a lack of knowledge about what we don't know.

When thinking about the unknown unknowns, another phrase that comes to mind is "we don't know what we don't know because we don't know what we don't know." This is a phrase that was used to discuss [cultural literacy](#) in the 1990s, especially by scholars such as E. D. Hirsch Jr. and Allan Bloom. Another, more recent variation of the unknown unknowns has been attributed to the software engineer and researcher [Eliezer Yudkowsky](#) who said: One of the chief pieces of advice I give to aspiring rationalists is "Don't try to be clever." And, "Listen to those quiet, nagging doubts." If you don't know, you don't know what you don't know, you don't know how much you don't know, and you don't know how much you needed to know.

I once asked a professor the question, how does one escape the tyranny of not knowing what you don't know if you don't know what you don't know? This professor said, just admit that you don't know. One could say that the beginning of any pursuit of knowledge is the personal admission of not knowing something.

Not knowing is not only our present reality, it is also a good starting point for meaning making. Sure, it's great to discuss what we already know? However, these are ideas that already have names and definitions. There are a lot of poems that have already been written and ideas that have already been defined. However, before these ideas were named, or before the poetry was written, their authors were faced with unnamed unknowns. Our challenge today is giving names to the unknown and understanding ideas that are developing in the realm of nagging doubts and intuitive feeling. This place of unknowing was at the heart of medieval [mysticism](#). I am not a philosopher, but primarily a religious practitioner, so I can only speak to [mysticism](#) in faith experiences, including ones that sometimes address experiences that go beyond rationalism. And I am not saying what we need now

is a mystical approach to these nagging questions about what's coming next, for the answers we are looking for are concrete and rational: am I going to find a summer job, do I need to upgrade my internet connection, will my little sister's insistence on attending my Zoom lectures hurt my grade? Although mysticism may not help you answer the concrete questions, it may help define a way of approaching the unknowns.

Regardless of your faith tradition, approaching the unknown with simply being open is a good first step. The Christian tradition's contemplative practices focus on achieving this openness by being centered on finding that openness before God and aligning one's heart and desire with God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Buddhist traditions approach this openness with practices that encourage emptying oneself of desires and secrets. This openness may be achieved in many ways. Sometimes we approach the unknown by becoming closed as an attempt to shield ourselves from the uncertainty. We sometimes try to recreate in our hearts and minds that reality that has now moved away into the past. Uncertainty is uncomfortable. Being closed and hiding in the past makes this uncertainty even more uncomfortable. This is why some contemplative practices encourage being mindful of one's breathing and posture. You may not be able to control anything, and during the coronavirus crisis, even breathing can no longer be taken for granted. However, in taking deep breaths and moving through the discomfort of uncertainty, we might find ourselves finding ways of being open. It is in these moments; we begin to find new language for the unknown. Eventually, we will know more.

Approaching uncertainty by being open is characterized in a prayer in the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer that is a variation of a prayer found in the [prologue](#) of the Christian medieval mystical classic, [The Cloud of Unknowing](#). The adapted prayer goes as follows:

“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Being open in the midst of uncertainty is not an easy task. However, the good news is that the semester ends in three weeks. We don't know much, but we know that much. Eventually, we will know more. Don't jump to conclusions, live in the cloud of unknowing. For a least a little while longer.

Thank you for your response to what's happening in your neighborhood with the coronavirus crisis. Please fill out the survey and leave your response, which I will share next week. I will keep them anonymous (unless you say otherwise) but this is helpful for all of you to know that you are still Williams students and now, you are all studying abroad. Let us know how you are doing and give us insight about how this crisis is affecting your communities.

Responses from the Week of April 19, 2020

EDT (Maine)	Besides grocery stores and banks everything is mostly normal, but people are becoming antisocial not just distant
Pacific Standard Time (Southern California)	My community is not fully handling the shelter-in-place mandate. No one is protesting about the mandate seen in other communities/states, but if I go on walks with my dad we do come across people without gloves and/or masks. In Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, and I think all of California that it is now illegal to go outside without a mask and gloves. The elderly and some of the local churches have followed the orders by reminding their congregations to do so and by speaking to those who don't speak

English. I find those who don't speak English or have recently moved from Latin America have not understood the new law. But it is usually the religious centers that have been able to reach out to those who don't speak English to put on masks and gloves but none of the religious centers (that I know of) haven't had services. Those would have been shut down, quickly,

Lastly, there has been a non-profit group called PATH that I receive emails from. They have been labeled as essential by the local government since they help the homeless. I really want more people to learn about PATH and give donations because I think they are the only few organizations that I know of that are actively helping the homeless to get gloves and masks and temporary homes during the pandemic.

I ask the Chaplain Office to give prayers to not only everyone affected by the pandemic, but also those who are working in the front lines, like PATH, who are putting themselves in danger willingly.

Yes, we in the Chaplains office are offering prayers! Please keep those on the frontlines in your prayers! In New York, every night at 7 p.m., New Yorkers go out of their homes to applaud those on the front lines. Here is a [video](#) of one of the evenings where neighbors are applauding. My friends in New York say this happens every night all over the city.

We also know that some of you are struggling with the coronavirus in more severe ways, by recovering from the virus or helping someone who has the virus. Some have also lost loved ones to the virus. The Chaplains' Office is hosting a Grief Support for those who have lost loved ones to the virus. More information about this group is available at the end of the email. Please send information for how you can help with the coronavirus while sheltering in place. Send information about the advocacy group and how students may be involved. I am also including something from Daily Messages about Williams Students making masks, also included at the end of the email. Be safe everyone!

INFORMATION AT THE END OF THE EMAIL:

Hello all -- I will be including new information at the top of this section of the weekly letter. Most of the information will not change and will be provided for your convenience. As always, the survey is available -- If you are interested in meeting with me by Zoom and Google Hangout, please fill out the survey -- it's not really a survey but a way of being in touch. I am also going to include the updated information for reaching all of the chaplains at the end of this email.

Grief Support Group for Students Who Have Lost Loved One to Covid: Weekly on Wednesday, 7pm EDT/6pm CDT/4pm PDT. Zoom room info and password will be given after RSVP'ing to Rabbi Seth at smw4. If you have any questions, please reach out to any of the chaplains.

Williams Mask Initiative: Masks for service workers and volunteers who help higher-risk populations.

Reach out to family and friends you know that have sewing abilities! Help from anyone is greatly appreciated. We are specifically requesting the [sewn masks made along the guidelines](#) provided by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

After you are finished making your masks, please contact Julia Pham at jhp2@williams.edu with the number of masks you have made. She will give you packaging instructions and a shipping address to ensure that our delivery services run smoothly for both the handlers and the receiving organizations. If you would like to help the initiative but do not have the ability to sew masks, please contact Rachel Cross at rec4@williams.edu for information about other ways you can provide support or Chloe Henderson at cgh1@williams.edu if you would like to make a donation!

Rev. Valerie's Office Hours -- Drop by, bring a friend and some ideas!

Visit my weekly check-in time on Thursdays 12 noon EST (<https://zoom.us/j/5167356637>). Last week I showed a very short video (less than four minutes). The [video\(s\)](#) were short, one aimed at Italy and the other to the United States. Very interesting, haunting, send me your thoughts via email to vb7@williams.edu if you watch the film. Please be careful, if you are having a particularly hard time with the coronavirus, this might have triggering effects.

Do you have something you would like to discuss with others during this time? Drop in, say hello and bring an interesting clip that you found on the internet. The check-in time is 12 noon EST – bring your lunch or breakfast if you're on the west coast or a snack if you are in another time zone. All are welcome.

Protestant Chaplain Survey

Please click [here](#) to fill out a brief survey so that I as Protestant Chaplain (and Chaplain to the College) and we in the chaplains' office know how to support you.

Appointments with Rev. Valerie -- Office Hours Thursday Afternoons

I am available to speak with students on Thursday afternoon. If you are interested in meeting with Rev. Valerie through Google Hangout, please click [here](#) to sign up for a 30 minute slot on Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. If you would like to meet at another time, please [email](#) me and I'll find a time that works for you.

The Chaplains' Office is on Instagram!

Follow the Chaplains' Office on Instagram at [williams_chaplains_office](#). Send us pictures of how you are living in the moment!

The Virtual Chaplains' Office is open!

Hello students, we miss meeting you in person, but we are available for one-on-one meetings, groups meetings and other online opportunities. For more information please visit chaplain.williams.edu.

The Rev. Valerie Bailey Fischer - 413-517-5364 — vb7@williams.edu

Imam Sharif Rosen - 413-672-7048 — sar4@williams.edu

Rabbi Seth Wax - 617-460-3317 — smw4@williams.edu

Tracy Finnegan - 413-455-5790 — tff1@williams.edu

Nancy Luczynski - 413-597-2483 — nluczyns@williams.edu

Rev. Valerie's Office Hours

Thursdays, 1 - 4 p.m., sign up for appointments with Rev. Valerie at my [Google Calendar](#). Once you click on this [link](#), click on an open appointment slot to sign up. To cancel an appointment slot you've already booked, leave this sign-up page and delete the event from your own calendar. If you would like to meet at another time, please email me at vb7@williams.edu.

Thursdays Weekly Check-in: Thursday from 12 noon to 1 p.m.

<https://zoom.us/j/5167356637>

Meeting ID: 516 735 6637

One tap mobile

+16465588656,,5167356637# US (New York)

+13126266799,,5167356637# US (Chicago)

This is a Zoom meeting room for students to check in, visit with other Williams students and Rev. Valerie. Bring your breakfast, lunch, coffee or tea, depending on your time zone! No RSVP. necessary!

Weekly Letter: Rev. Valerie will email a weekly letter each week. If you would like to receive this letter, please email Rev. Valerie at vb7@williams.edu.

Coming soon: Daily Office zoom meetings (depending on interest, a small group will do morning, evening prayer or compline together for about 30 minutes).

Rabbi Seth's Office Hours Mondays 1:30-2:30pm

At his Zoom Room

<https://zoom.us/j/8321750148>

Meeting ID: 832 175 0148

One tap mobile: +16468769923,,8321750148# US (New York)

No need to RSVP for office hours; just log on!. To set up a meeting at a different time, email him at smw4.

Weekly Shabbat services at 5pm EDT at <https://zoom.us/j/8321750148>

Passover Seders on Wednesday April 8 and Thursday April 9. To RSVP, email Rabbi Seth at smw4.

Imam Sharif's Office Hours Flexible meeting hours.

Please email sar4@williams.edu to schedule your meeting.

Weekly Friday Reflections,

@2pm EST

<https://zoom.us/j/8674799819>

Regular programs to be announced by the MSU and/or Muslim Chaplain

Tracy's Office Hours Tuesdays, noon-1pm or By appointment.

Tracy is available for one on one (or group if interested) meetings by zoom chat & Google Hang out.

Coming soon: Tracy is also available for Centering prayer practice (no experience necessary) and Lectio Divina (no experience necessary).

Nancy's Office Hours

I am working from home and will be periodically checking email and voicemail remotely Monday - Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. If there is anything I can do to assist you in any way, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at nluczyns@williams.edu or call the office at 413-597-2483. Your voice message will automatically be sent to my computer here at home.

DISCLAIMER:

This is an email to students who have indicated that you would like to receive information from the Chaplains' Office and whose religious affiliation is widely defined and includes agnostics and atheists and a variety of those Christian communities that could be loosely defined as Protestant.

If you do not want to continue receiving occasional updates and to stop receiving emails from the Chaplains' Office, please 1. email me and 2. log into your People Soft account, click on the Religious Affiliation link and change your answer to: "I'd like to receive information related to my affiliation from Yes to No. I would do this for you but I do not have access to students' Psoft accounts.

I know you must be getting so much information, but I hope to send this email out each Sunday to keep you updated and to offer support as Protestant Chaplain and Chaplain to the College.

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Attachments area

Preview YouTube video We clap because we care: New Yorkers applaud coronavirus frontline workers

