

Update from the Protestant Chaplain

March 22, 2020

Good morning,

This is a very unique Sunday -- for this is one of those few times in the nation's history that all of the houses of worship, gathering places and reflection spaces are empty. This morning, I am thinking about you, the Williams students, and wondering how you are doing in the aftermath of the quick and abrupt ending to our semester together, the new way of being Williams College online and the pending pandemic. You are all in my thoughts and prayers.

We are social creatures, we need each other. Depending on your level of devotion and religiosity, you may also feel as if you need God, something greater than yourselves that is all powerful and almighty. We may feel this need more than ever during times of community-wide crisis. For these kinds of crises makes everyone feel a little bit smaller in the face of something big and unknown. But the big and unknown in this case is not a deity, but a pandemic. And as a Christian, a person of faith and a generally optimistic person, I believe God is stronger than a pandemic. However, pandemics are real, big, scary and at this point, unknown. But pandemics have occurred many times in history. I find myself looking for wisdom from what was learned from previous pandemics, something that might help us better prepare for the days ahead.

An unlikely source of wisdom came from a middle school novel my daughter read for her summer reading assignment last year: *Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson. The book tells about the yellow fever epidemic that struck parts of the United States and took place in post-colonial Philadelphia. I was drawn to the book because I thought it would be light reading, and because of its setting in Philadelphia, my hometown. But in this present pandemic, this book was a wake up call to prepare and to take our situation very seriously. The book was also a reminder of something a wise person once said to me, that the only way to approach these huge crises is to prepare and to recover.

We are in a season of preparation. For those of you who observe Lent in preparation for Easter, we have been in a period of preparation for quite some time. And now, because of all of the disruptions, our preparation for Easter, for the end of spring semester and for the seniors; for life after Williams, our preparation has been redirected toward sheltering in and isolation. What a strange change. The pandemic forecasts are also quite grim. And as we are facing the unknown, we are given one consistent message -- prepare.

And prepare we must. In addition to the physical preparations; storing 14 days of food, shelter - in, taking precautions with intentional social distancing, we should also prepare spiritually for being in times like these.

There is so much I can say about preparing during this time but I think we might be on information overload. And our spaces are now very limited -- no school, no market, no sacred space. I would like to paraphrase something about sacred space from a website that I recently visited (spokengospel.com). We are often defined by our spaces; school, market, your house, your friend's house. What happens to our self definitions when we are limited to very small spaces? In spokengospel.com's commentary on the book of Numbers, the writer talks about sacred time being an alternative to sacred spaces. Sacred time is how religious communities have defined themselves. Sacred time is how faith practitioners mark the hours as they live in linear time. For example, morning is marked by an intentional morning prayer practice. Numerous faith communities also mark the hours by specific prayer times. Or, for many of us, regardless of faith, we mark the mid-day by lunchtime. And so on...

I encourage you, during this preparation period, to organize your time to include sacred time. Find a day where you are not on -- not working, not zooming or google hanging out, a time for rest. Some call this Sabbath or Quiet Time, depending on your faith tradition. This special day could become the anchor for the rest of your week -- your study time, your friend and family time, your self care time and also your daily sacred time that may be spent in prayer or reading sacred text.

I would like to offer opportunities to support you during this time. The chaplains are here for everyone, feel free to contact any chaplain. Our contact information may be found on our website at chaplain.williams.edu. I am trying to set up a time for one-to-one meetings or meetings with small groups of students. These meetings are available by Zoom and Google hangout. The best way to reach us is through text to our mobile phones. And if you cannot reach us, please email Nancy and she will help us set up an online appointment with you.

And finally, during this time, please embrace that which brings you solace, support and meaning during this time, especially your faith. We don't know what will happen. We can prepare, and we will recover. But as we go through the parts of the pandemic that are a mystery to us today, connection with our God, our faith, our friends and family will be an important part of living through these times.

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 during this time. Thank you.

Peace,

Rev. Valerie

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