

KEEP YOUR STRENGTH AND SPIRITS UP

A meditation by Galen Guengerich
All Souls NYC – at Home
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I suppose the time will eventually come when we will be able to look back in retrospect and realize when we began to take this epidemic seriously. On the practical level, I've taken it seriously all along. To my knowledge, All Souls was among the first – maybe the very first – congregation in Manhattan to stop in-person programming.

On the personal level, however, I realize now that I've been externalizing the risk. I'm relatively healthy, and I'm physically fit. But I'm also over 60, and I'm male – two key risk factors.

When the news of the Fusco family from New Jersey landed in my inbox, the reality of our situation began to set in. Seven members of their immediate family had been infected by the coronavirus, apparently at a family dinner on March 10. Four have since died, and three more are in critical condition. The dead include the 73-year-old matriarch of the family and three of her children, all of whom were younger than me.

The truth is that people have already died and more are going to die, including some people I know and quite possibly some people I love. I have no immunity to the virus either.

In the upcoming days and weeks, people are going to continue to die for all the usual reasons as well.

Daniel Kanter's father died on Wednesday of leukemia. Daniel is senior minister of the First Unitarian Church in Dallas, Texas, and he's a long-time good friend of mine. Daniel wrote an op-ed for the Dallas Morning News about the challenges posed by the death of his father in the time of coronavirus. He pointed out that his family can't gather to remember and mourn. His congregation can't gather to celebrate his father's life. This is a new challenge in some ways, Daniel said, but in others, it's not.

In his op-ed, Daniel quoted from a sermon preached by the celebrated 20th-century writer C. S. Lewis. Lewis preached the sermon in 1939 at a church in Oxford, England. The sermon was titled "Learning in War-Time." In the sermon, Lewis said, "I think it important to try to see the present calamity in a true perspective. The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself."

Lewis added, "We are mistaken when we compare war with 'normal life.' Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil ... turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of cries, alarms, difficulties, emergencies."

Lewis makes an excellent point — one we should very much keep in mind in our time. Let's not think of ourselves as unduly put-upon by the coronavirus. This is not the first time human beings have faced tough times, and it won't be the last. Besides, we're exceedingly fortunate to face this challenge today, here in the US — and not a century or two ago, or in less developed parts the world.

The question is how we should respond to this particular version of life not being normal. I have two suggestions. First, keep your strength up. Second, keep your spirits up.

A couple weeks ago, while I was working out at the gym, I struck up a conversation with one of the managers, a woman named Krista. She was in the process of ordering some new T-shirts for the gym, and she was collecting ideas from members about what message should be emblazoned on the shirts. I told her about a T-shirt I had seen that I liked a lot. It said on the back: "Building Strength Through Ritual." That's what it is, Krista said in response. It's a ritual — you do the same thing, over and over again. It's how you get strong.

She's right. It's how you get strong, and it's how you stay strong. A ritual takes what's most important and puts it at the center of our lives so we won't forget it or neglect it. This holds true whether you're talking about physical strength, emotional strength, or spiritual strength. You build strength through ritual.

At one key turning point in Albert Camus's 1947 novel *The Plague*, Camus reveals the internal quandary of Dr. Bernard Rieux, one of the town's leading doctors. Rieux has literally come face-to-face with the power and pervasiveness of the plague. Death comes at him from every direction. There are bodies everywhere. Rieux feels overwhelmed and wonders whether it's even worth going on his daily rounds.

Camus writes: "Rieux pulled himself together. There lay certitude; there, in the daily round. All the rest hung on mere threads and trivial contingencies; you couldn't waste your time on it. The thing was to do your job as it should be done."

You can call it what you want — a ritual or a daily round. You can even call it a schedule. The point is to build into the hours of each day the elements that will enable you to stay physically strong, emotionally strong, and spiritually strong. It's what we do repeatedly that most decisively determines what we will become. That's why spiritual practice is so-called: it's a practice, something we do repeatedly.

In the days and weeks ahead, we need to keep our strength up by repeatedly doing whatever we need to do to stay physically strong, emotionally strong, and spiritually strong.

Second, we need to keep our spirits up. We need to nurture a spirit of optimism — especially in these difficult times.

Optimism happens to be the subtitle of Voltaire's 1758 novel *Candide*, which recounts the adventures and misfortunes of young Candide. Endowed at the start with everything necessary for a happy and successful life, Candide suffers the opposite: every conceivable misfortune, tragedy, and form of abuse.

At the very end of the tale, Voltaire suggests how one can, as he put it in his most famous phrase, crush the horror. He says, simply, “We need to work our fields,” or as it is often translated, “make our gardens grow.”

According to Voltaire, saving the world is like growing a crop. We need to work our fields. We don’t need to work other people’s fields, or fields in different or better locations, but our fields. And we don’t need to ponder our fields, or exclaim how weedy they are, or how poor the soil is, or compare them with the best possible fields or the worst. We need to work our fields. The root meaning of the word optimism is power – the power to do the work that is ours to do.

In the days and weeks ahead, we need to keep our spirits up by doing the work that is ours to do. We need to check on our neighbors. We need to video chat with our family and friends. We need to help out others whenever and however we can. We need to balance the bad news in the headlines with good news about the beauty and goodness and joy that remain undaunted – the beauty of spring, the goodness of selfless compassion, the joy of love and friendship.

If we keep our strength up and our spirits up, we will together endure this test and emerge stronger for the testing.

I love you. Stay strong, and keep your spirits up!