

The One Most Important Thing You Can Do Right Now by Kelly Wendorf

Last night I received a call from a loved one in Seattle. She and her roommates were self-quarantined in their home, at least one of them had COVID-19.

They are young and vital, yet with Seattle melting down around them, their workplaces closed, graduation postponed, and their college classes abruptly shifted online, the household was becoming a veritable titanic of emotion. She was leaving Seattle, she said, along with her roommate, to take refuge at her roommate's family home across the country.

I paused as I felt the tsunami of fear wash through me, I exhaled deeply to regulate my brain so I could respond with some intelligence, and then I said, "I'm not informed enough to advise you...so you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to pull you and I onto a call with Dr. Brown."

Betsy Brown, M.D. is a present-day hero, along with millions of healthcare workers around the world. Lucky for me, she is a dear friend and a long-term client of EQUUS. She is also a physician leader at Polyclinic in Seattle, and no stranger to epidemics as she has been on the front lines of many, including AIDS for decades.

And Dr. Brown being who she is, she picked up the phone.

I wish I had recorded the call. I wish that the entire world had bent their ear to the 20 minute conversation that ensued. Dr. Brown walked us through the symptomatic arc the virus would take with she and her friends. She reassured her how mild the illness would inevitably be for them being as they are so young; and to simply be aware of their symptom trends, and what to look for, what to expect. Her even, sane and measured advice reduced the already overwhelmed Seattle ER units by at least four that night and empowered the college household to do the right thing instead...just rest. "And when you get better, we are pretty sure at this point that you will be immune to this thing, and then you can help the rest of your friends and neighbors," she said, calling forth the leadership in us. Dr. Brown then went on to tell us something really important;

"But as a person resilient or immune to COVID-19, you have an important responsibility to those who are vulnerable..."

And what she then said is the main point I wish to portray in this post:

The point to all the closings and all the cancellations is this--to manage the healthcare system so that it can respond to those who are vulnerable to die from COVID-19, and to

shorten the arc of the pandemic's duration. In effect it is to keep our bodies from being unwitting vehicles for the virus to jump from doorknob to doorknob, credit card to credit card. The more we lessen our physical scope of our touch on things around us, the more we participate in shortening this hell-realm, and the more lives we save (and on a lighter note, the more money we can start to make again).

The one most effective thing you can do right now, today, right this very second is this: stay where you are, where ever that is, hunker down and stay put.

This is the socially responsible thing to do. It's good for you. It's good for your loved ones. And it's really good for people at risk--your mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers.

If you want more information about how this whole COVID-19 thing works, and the call to our individual leadership within it, please read this excellent piece that for me has risen above all the rest of the ridiculous babble out there.

In these times of fear, it's natural to want to be close to our loved ones. It's a natural survival response to want to huddle together, bring our family and friends close, call to them across the globe and bring them home. The trouble is that we are not in fact in such dangerous times that warrant huddling close...we are not all dying, we are not being bombed by nuclear weapons, we are not all being consumed by earthquakes. This emergency is different and requires a different, non-emotional response. We are in a pandemic. A pandemic requires we do the opposite and not huddle, not come together, and to stay put, stay apart, stay away, so that it can recede, and so that the healthcare system can catch up to it, and help it recede even further and faster.

With spring break upon us, and colleges closing, then we have a veritable diaspora wanting to happen in this country. Wanting to travel (by car, train or plane) across the country to be closer to family, or to get away from everything, or to take refuge somewhere, or just get away from a boring college town because there's no reason to stay, is dangerous thinking. It's a 'toilet paper' reaction, not an evidence-informed response. This is exactly what happened to Italy when their government started to shut down Milan...everyone freaked out and fled to their familial hometowns to ride out the storm. Goodbye Italy.

It angers me that we have no clear or intelligent leadership or guidance from people who are in a position to make the public do the right thing. So absent that, we need to step in and do our own leading, because we are smarter than our public leadership.

Please stop. Stop moving, driving, erranding, traveling, running away, distracting, thrashing around. Please tell your friends, your family, and your colleagues to stop, as business owners, support your staff to stop if they can work from home. And if you are not home, don't go home. Stay where you are. Like literally. And this means limiting the scope of your body being 'a vehicle' on which the virus rides around (think of yourself like a car, or a Sherpa who needs to be parked). I'm talking no dinners out with friends, no parties, no playdates for the kids, and let online shopping deliver your food and supplies if that's available, or at the very least order online and pick it up at the parking lot.

If you absolutely can't work from home long term, reduce your exposure to the public as much as you can. Stop any unnecessary travel, gatherings or errands, and work from home when you can. I'm challenging all of us to see how few feet we can step from our front door. My count today, zero. My count yesterday, zero.

“But that’s so boring!” people say. To this I want to entice you into something really wonderful. Think of it this way...it’s going to be like a snow-day. Remember those? Remember that exquisitely delicious feeling of a snow-day’s 100% free pass? And if we play our cards right and stay home and request that others stay home too, we will help make it more like a delightful snow-month instead of a devastating ice age.

Not everyone can, of course, go to such extremes. Not everyone can work from home long term. Not everyone can stay there, for myriad other reasons. I’m not saying it’s the perfect directive...nothing is. But for those who can, who have the ability to, it is the perfect directive. Just because others cannot, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t. If you can; it means you should, even more, for the people who cannot. This is not about you. And every single thing you do, or don’t do, matters to countless millions of lives. Especially in a pandemic. At no other time in history will this become more evident.

Tell me truth... in recent months, haven’t you’ve muttered to yourself that you really just want a break? Haven’t you been thirsting to have some free time, where the world wasn’t anxiously awaiting your return to bombard you with a billion emails held at bay while you took a rare weekend off? Are there not some endeavors you’ve been aching to do but had no time for?

I’m going to offer us a gentle reframe to allow us some ease, and even some possibility in these dark times. Karuna is a Sanskrit term that means ‘the state of compassion and self-compassion that leads to Buddhahood’. Let’s make the coronavirus into the karunavirus. And guess what, the karunavirus, in her infinite compassion is extending us all a snow-season where we can regather ourselves, care for ourselves and each other.

What do you want to do with your snow season? Your enforced sabbatical? Your free pass? Now is your big moment to do all those things you’ve been yearning to do. Don’t miss it! Is there a book you wanted to write? A company you wanted to start? An online course you’ve been wanting to take? A child who would love your undivided attention. A website you wanted to build? Are there friendships that need rekindling, a closet that needs clearing? Some sleep and deep rest that needs having?

Because I tell you this. The present circumstances are temporary (even more temporary if we stay put), and when they are over, those of us who have used this time to create, mend, build, dream, clear, heal, will hit the pavement running and be ahead of all the others who may still have enough toilet paper, but have nothing to show for this enormous gift of time karuna bestowed.

Start today. Grab a cup of tea. Put up your feet. Throw your car keys into a drawer. Pull out a piece of paper and write down what you want to do, who you want to be, what you want to learn, and how you want to contribute in this powerful time of change.