

March 23, 2020

Opinions

When we come to the end of our strength, the universe will hold us



By **Michael Gerson**, Washington Post Columnist

When Blaise Pascal said, “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone,” he clearly didn’t foresee the coronavirus. But one complication of the virus, and the social distancing necessary to slow its spread, is a nation where quiet rooms are more common. With the obvious exception of rooms that also confine toddlers, many Americans are experiencing a strange stillness in places where their lives were once lived loudly.

This quiet can feel oppressive, so we turn to Netflix, podcasts, cable news and other diverting stimulation. In the absence of a real schedule, the days tend to run into each other, marked only by the celestial cycle of coronavirus taskforce briefings. We set our watches by the rise of Tony Fauci in the east.

To many of us, the space between ticks of the clock seems especially long. Silence is often a place where fears gather, and the current crisis offers endless opportunities for worry. There are worries about the health of elderly loved ones, about the personal consequences of a flash-frozen economy, about the disruption of important plans and family milestones, about overwhelmed health systems. And there is the recurring and justified fear caused by unstable, incompetent national leadership.

The most enterprising among us interrupt our anxiety with telework (when our jobs allow), with long, socially distanced walks and with Zoom chats among friends and relatives. But this still leaves a lot of time on our hands. And the question naturally arises: Can the quiet serve some constructive purpose? Not the kind of purpose found in reorganizing your spice rack, but in living a better life. Can the silence also bring some contentment, serenity and peace?

Here I can only speak from experience and respond with a hearty: Maybe. Occasionally. Partially.

There are techniques that turn the idle mind away from worry and toward something better. I was once a skeptic about meditation and mindfulness, until I faced the forced quiet of a hospital ward. In addition to an unresolved past and an uncertain future, there is a solid present that is possible to (briefly) visit. The mind is like a whirling hamster wheel of worry and ambition. Stopping it for just a moment to focus on the moment — on the hidden beauty of just being — is a healthy act. It feels like the reset that results from interrupting a circuit. It is a common enough experience for many who meditate and many who pray, but it resists description without seeming esoteric — like I am seeming now.

This has little to do with religion and much, I expect, with the way the mind works. There is refuge in inhabiting — even for a few moments — a calm, grateful, embodied present. And it would improve our lives if we lived there more often.

At its best, mindfulness can separate us from our weakness and worry, and permit a more objective view of our life and its blessings. And we need something similar as a society. We are facing an unprecedented threat, but facing it together, with medical advances beyond the dreams of previous eras. We can continue large chunks of our lives in virtual ways. We can be present to one another through extraordinary technologies. These are reasons for gratitude.

And religion is not entirely irrelevant to such matters. In many traditions, God is accessible, not just in congregations and buildings, but in stillness.

There is a wonderful, simple [poem](#) by [Philip Booth](#) about teaching his daughter to float in the ocean that concludes: “As you float now, where I held you/ and let go, remember when fear/cramps your heart what I told you:/ lie gently and wide to the light-year/ stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.”

This is what most religions promise in times of fear — not immediate deliverance, but the hope that suffering and failure are not final. This does not release anyone from worry and heavy responsibility. But it does promise that worry and responsibility don't need to consume us. It promises that a voice of reassurance can speak out of the silence. It promises that the stillness of a pounding heart can be replaced by the stillness of a wise trust.

In our nation's long, involuntary lent, fear abounds. We should oppose it with all we have, for as long as we can. But when we come to the end of our strength and lie back, the universe will hold us.