

Humility  
A Reflection by The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade  
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I was wondering . . . What might we learn from the coronavirus pandemic?

It is obviously far too early to claim learning beyond the most immediate and tangible lessons – life is precious, preparation is good, mis- and dis-information are bad. Our national and international focus needs to be on confronting the virus itself, grieving for the dead, and repairing the damage being done by fear of the virus. Individuals and households must focus on living like Biblical pharisees for whom social distancing and ritual washing were absolutes. But, still, in the quiet of various forms of quarantine, the mind can wander and wonder: What might we learn from this experience?

I have some hope that, in addition to emerging social and economic lessons, we might discover some humility about our place in the universe.

The prevailing human attitude is that we rule. Nature’s role is to do human bidding and serve human needs – or so goes our common thinking. If science is the study of nature in all its forms, it will add to our comforts and reduce our pains – or so most of us expect. That we expect nature to behave in accordance with this expectation can be seen in the common description of hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes as “natural disasters.” What we are really saying is that when nature does what it naturally does and the result is to reduce our comfort or increase our pain, something is terribly wrong. It is a disaster. The same can be seen more plainly in our use of the term *disease*, as if a disturbance of our *ease* were a violation of one of life’s norms.

We are not unlike the French nobility who were shocked by the fall of the Bastille, or plantation owners who trembled at stories of slave rebellions, or colonists who could not understand the lack of gratitude shown by natives. There is a natural order, we just happen to be at the top of it and others (peasants, slaves, natives, nature) at the bottom – or so we’ve opined. But to humans, the natural order as we understand it is as fixed as the seasons and the stars. Change at that level is beyond, or more likely beneath, comprehension. Of course the problem was that our forebears were not experiencing violations of nature but rather their own inadequate understanding of it. Our understanding of nature and our place in its dynamics probably needs the same sort of serious correction. We might begin with the commonly held view that we rule and everything else exists for our benefit.

By pointing this out, I make no case for human suffering. I do not support the right to life of cancer cells, nor do I defend the free assembly of bacteria. What I do support is a broader and wiser understanding of the fact that we share existence with all of nature. Things, all things including all of nature and all of us, are intertwined. The fact that human life is interwoven with the life of the coronavirus is the shocking discovery of the young year 2020. That is not a violation of nature but a revelation of our inadequate understanding of it.

We rightly worry about the economics of the pandemic. We might also recall that, as former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams pointed out, “The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment.” One does not have to be a saint to see through the eyes of Francis who wrote about “Brother Sun and Sister Moon.” One does not have to be a Native American to know the truth told by Chief Seattle, “The earth does not belong to people. People belong to the earth. . . . We did not weave the web of life. We are a mere strand on it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.”

I do not know what we will learn from the coronavirus experience. It is far too early to begin sorting through its multiple messages. But it is not too early to hope that one of our lessons might be about the need for a heavy dose of humility as we consider our place in the universe.