

## Letting go of things we can do without

These are trying times, but they are also times when wisdom is within easy reach. We just need to open our 'third eye' and maybe use a little humor to access it. This includes the most powerful among us like the Dalai Lama who was in New York recently to address the United Nations before the Coronavirus hit that city, hard. After his address, he walked out onto 42nd street where he saw a hot dog vendor. Being hungry, he ordered a hot dog and a Coke. The vendor began to prepare the hot dog, and the Dalai Lama reached into his flowing robe for his cash only to find that all he had were hundred dollar bills. He sheepishly peeled one off and handed it to the hot dog vendor. The vendor gave him his hot dog and can of Coke then turned to serve the next customer. The Dalai Lama stopped him and asked: "What about my change?" Without missing a beat, the vendor smiled and said, "Change comes from within."

It's a joke, of course, but our forced seclusion is actually affording us a rare opportunity to do some important soul-searching and self-assessment about the things we really truly need to make our lives meaningful. But, in order to do that we need to be willing to ask some pretty big questions about what makes us happy and fulfilled. And that's something many of us don't usually take the time to do, unless of course we are nearing the autumn (or as in my case) the winter of our lives. Long ago, during the Depression years, the economy dictated pretty much what our options were. Bread lines were long; jobs were scarce and many Americans didn't have the luxury of asking themselves what they could give up. The situation controlled one's material well-being.

WWII was another wake-up call as our country was forced to tighten its belt and deal with shortages of one kind or another. The war effort made us conserve and/or collect paper, metal, gasoline, you name it. Factories were converted to production centers for war materiel as some are being done today with ventilators and other equipment to keep the Coronavirus-afflicted from dying. I remember my grandfather talk about the Spanish flu (he was in his 20s when it hit Wisconsin in September of 1918). It was impossible for me as a small boy to grasp its severity then, but I later learned that it killed 675,000 people across the USA in just two years' time.

So far, rural America has been spared the massive numbers of Covid-19 cases that have plagued our big cities, and it may well be that this pandemic will be confined, largely, to urban America. Whatever the case, we are being forced to re-examine what is important to us and to decide what we can do without. Fortunately (and unfortunately) we have moved from an agrarian economy to a manufacturing and service one. The jobs we've shed have been what our parents and grandparents would have called 'unnecessary ones' like those in the entertainment, travel and tourism sectors. Though unnecessary, they have nonetheless become staples in our mixed economy, and their loss is hurting us.

We've stopped flying, cruising the seas and eating out. We've stopped gathering at sporting events and no longer worship together or sit in classrooms. We've been forced to actually talk to our children and prepare lesson plans or help them with their studies. Told to stay home from work, we're sitting in front of computer screens all day long, trying to be productive. Those without work are either sleeping or eating too much or watching too much television. We're betwixt and between and not fully motivated or engaged. Some are climbing the walls while others have short fuses and are ready to explode.

It's time we stepped back and actually 'leaned in.' Time to figure out what we can let go of when this is all over. If we don't, we will miss one of the upsides of the crisis...an opportunity to take control of our lives and dispense with the superfluous, like meaningless routines and things that just fill up the void. You know, all that gimcrack that we convince ourselves is important to us. I suspect whether we do the soul-searching or not that this crisis will change us forever and that we will embrace technology to an even greater degree than before. Social media accounts will mushroom. Distance-learning and telemedicine will become a bigger part of our everyday lives. We may (I hope) start to conserve our precious resources and plan better.

We might realize the importance of placing a higher price on social interaction and visit our elderly relatives and neighbors more often. And, who knows, one of the most significant takeaways could be a new-found appreciation of our extraordinary freedoms of assembly, free speech and civic involvement. Finally, and this is my most fervent hope, that we might begin to value and trust each other more and realize that for all of our many differences we are more alike than we could have ever dreamed.

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