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MISSION STATEMENT

Riverwest Currents is dedicated to keeping readers informed about issues and events important to those who live, work, and play in and around our neighborhood. We believe Riverwest and Milwaukee are good places to make a home or set up a shop. We want to help promote safe and affordable neighborhoods, embrace urban aesthetics, respect diversity, and help make Riverwest residents aware of opportunities available to them.

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Good News? Bad News? Who Can Say?

By Tree Moore

We in the US live in a culture that likes definite answers. Either black or white, blue or red, conservative or progressive. I'm not a stickler for putting things in precise categories. Over the years I've experienced life as "both sides now." As I consider new situations, hear new stories, get to know people better, I discover that life is not simple. Rather, it's often quite complicated.

And on top of that, it keeps changing. I am now capable of behavior that thirty years ago I could not have "carried off." An example that comes to mind is giving a sermon about four years ago at the Unitarian church – big church filled with a congregation focusing their attention on just me. Not only did I do a quality job according to a number of listeners in the audience, I enjoyed myself! Me, who as a student at the University of Michigan wouldn't open her mouth even in a small (maybe 20 students) recitation section. I might sound dumb! The evolving process from a tongue-tied student to a rather confident elder assured that she has something to say, and to inspire others, is a story of personal growth and change.

And so, as already noted, we are a culture that wants definite answers. Answers to questions like, "Why is this happening?" and "What should we do?" Ours is an impatient and frightened population often looking for a quick fix, the seduction of a saving solution – ten easy steps in ten days.

For many years now I have found practical wisdom in the "punchline" of a Zen Buddhist fable: "Good news? Bad news? Who can say?" Perhaps you know the fable, where a series of events befall a Chinese farmer. He receives some horses. He gives a horse to his son, who falls from the horse and breaks his leg. The next week soldiers of the emperor come through the village to conscript all the able-bodied young men. To each of these events, the farmer has the same reaction: "Good news? Bad news? Who can say?" The implication of both sides having worth or value has given energy to my curiosity, lessened my

judgement and increased my humility regarding results. The Chinese symbol of crisis is the same as for opportunity.

Let us now consider the present coronavirus pandemic. Beginning with bad news, terrible in so many ways. To begin with, it has killed hundreds of thousands of people thus far worldwide. Because of its nature, the invisible virus moves in unpredictable ways – a cough, an exhalation, a touch – and you may be infected. Just like that! And it takes some days for you to even know you have been stricken, since coronavirus is highly contagious and sneaky. There does not seem to be adequate protection, nor a vaccination, nor a medical antidote to ensure your survival. You may have a mild case or a lethal one. No guarantee. If you are ill from it, you may be sitting at home by yourself, and finally going off to a hospital that may, or may not have a bed available, or a ventilator to aid your lungs. Worst of all, you may die alone. Perhaps with medical staff nearby checking in on you, but no loved ones, no last words to share, no hand holding as you take your last breaths. No comfort. No good-byes. Tragic.

The pandemic has resulted in an additional economic nightmare. Lockdowns are obviously causing never-ending dreadful ramifications. To name just a few nasty outcomes, domestic violence has increased, gun sales are up, school closures are affecting millions of children who receive free and reduced cost meals. Low income families are seriously impacted because they lack sick leave or health insurance. Folks in prison or immigration detention centers can't practice social distancing. The fate of small businesses that have been forced to close their doors is definitely uncertain. Further negatives will begin to emerge. Our whole democratic system is threatened. The thought that after the suffering and devastating losses have occurred, somehow life will return to "normal" (whatever that may be) is both naive and a delusional fantasy.

So to suggest that out of all this crazy chaos there is "good news" may seem heretical – a perverted Pollyanna fantasy. Yet, along with painful and disturbing emotions, many of us are discovering a silver lining – a fresh reality. And we are still sane and even hopeful.

I am aware of numerous positives. The fisherman excitedly tells me that he has never known the Milwaukee River to be so clear. You can actually see fish swimming by. With less traffic the air is less polluted both here and in China. Fewer traffic accidents.

Although I am having some difficulty knowing what day it is, there is a spaciousness in this time that is, perhaps, unsettling for some, yet so freeing for me, and perhaps for many of us. For those of us at home without young-uns, there can be a sense of quiet solitude instead of a diet of frenzied "shoulds." There is time to read a quality book and even time to reflect on what you read. If you should so desire, you can sort the stuff in your closet, which can be satisfying.

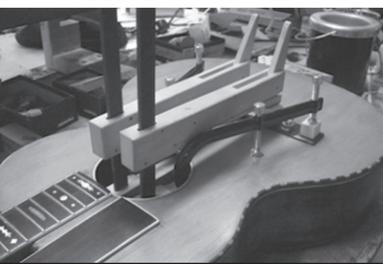
Amazing conversations are popping up on my computer. I'm invited into numerous enticing webinars via Zoom, humor and beautiful photography bless my screen. Parents at home with their children is a novel situation with its challenges, I'm sure, but also a wonderful opportunity to share all kinds of activities. Couples may become reacquainted. The level of creativity to connect with others down the block is high. Kids are having play dates from across the street, playing Simon Says while respecting distances. Chalk drawings with encouraging words appear on the pavement. Singing and playing music from balconies is a new "thing." The list goes on. And I have not mentioned the heroic medical staff putting themselves at risk as well as the bus drivers, garbage collectors, fire fighters, caregivers, and grocery store workers, to name a few, who are generously and courageously showing up. It is ironic that it often takes a crisis to bring out the finer qualities of humans.

And so here we are, caught up in a strangely fierce and difficult world. Could we even imagine the possible power of a highly contagious virus that would turn our world upside down? The results have been shocking, even traumatizing. As a result we have lost money, jobs, loved ones, security, mobility, and our everyday way of being. The effect of the virus shock is broad and likely will be felt in every industry and geography. In the words of the old song, "Hard Times Are Acomin'."

Disruptions as historic examples reinforce and create opportunities for positive change. You might want to read Rebecca Solnit's Hope in the Dark. Most of the old ways of thinking and doing are being seriously questioned or are no longer possible. Millions of people want to believe that a better world is possible but have become cynical and have lost the ability to envision anything better.

This pandemic is a giant wake up call for new hope. I believe within all of us is a spirit that is alive and will make a vital effort to guide us in creative, loving ways. We need to listen to our wiser selves. How to create a healthy and whole world is our task. This is the time! Together we can do it!

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