

Deprivation and Abundance in the Time of Coronavirus

By Mary Anne Cohen, LCSW



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Coronavirus has upended our lives and impacted every fiber of our being. I think about Rodolfo, a family friend, who had suffered through the earthquake of 1985 in Mexico City which killed 10,000 people in one fell swoop. Rodolfo sadly explained, “Because of this earthquake, I no longer trust gravity—something I just always took for granted.”

Rodolfo lost confidence in gravity just as we, during this pandemic, have lost confidence in the daily objects of our lives. Touching the handle of a supermarket cart or even just breathing if someone walks too close to us on the street can now be fraught with danger. We have been obliged to learn a new vocabulary—novel virus, social distancing, respiratory droplets, N95 masks, pulse oximeters, P.P.E., herd immunity, flattening the curve, and mandated mitigation methods.

But no amount of “mitigation methods” can heal the grief for the people who have died worldwide from this silent killer. We also grieve the extensive loss of jobs leading to economic insecurity for so many, and the disproportionate suffering of older people and those in minority communities.

How do we clinicians address these losses and the upending of our lives and our patients’ lives? My experience during 9/11 helped pave the way for me.

The morning of 9/11, Paula, an anorexic young woman patient, rang my office bell and told me a plane had hit the World Trade Center. We went up to my roof deck silently together and watched in shock just as the second tower slowly collapsed to the ground. Paula, who was always so emotionally constrained—as anorexic with her feelings as she was with her

food—reached for my hand and began to pray. There we were—a Jewish therapist and a born-again Christian—huddled together as she prayed to Jesus. In sharing this moment of fear yet also connection, Paula turned to cry on my shoulder. I held her. And this moment paved the way for her to become more trusting and comfortable with me. As we continued to move forward in her treatment for anorexia, she became better able to “flesh out” her emotions rather than only discuss the “bare bones” of her situation. This shared fear and pain of 9/11 became the “connective tissue” that drew us closer.

The Frame

Sometimes, as in the case of Paula, the shared humanity of the moment needs to override the traditional framework of how we conduct therapy. In the time of coronavirus, the frame feels more flexible and malleable than before, perhaps leading to more authentic connection.

Esther is crying as she speaks to me by Zoom from her dining room table. Her mother is in a nursing home, and she has not been allowed to visit her for months, something that she has done every day for five years. Her mother has been intubated because of health issues not related to the coronavirus, so there is no possibility of speaking to her on the phone or Facetimeing her. Esther’s mother is a Holocaust survivor as was her father. As Esther cries, I take note of the framed photographs of her family on the wall behind her. She does not “introduce” me to them, but I imagine the couple in the old-fashioned wedding attire must be her parents.

Their presence silently “witnesses” our session as their daughter, now in her 70s, cries by remote video. I want to reach through the screen and touch Esther, something I would not do in person, but my frustration with the distance between us on screen impels me to want to touch and comfort her. I am not sure our video session is expressing to her the full amount of compassion I am feeling. I’m having three dimensional feelings in a two-dimensional space. I want to be like Alice Through the Looking Glass and step through the screen to be with her. I tell her this. She smiles through her tears.

Olivia appears on my Zoom screen for her session. “I have no idea how I feel today,” she announces, “let me consult my tarot cards.” Before I have a chance to say, “Why don’t you consult your *inner self* to see what’s going on,” Olivia has whipped out her tarot deck and splays the cards on her table. They are astonishingly beautiful, and she explains they are an antique deck from Italy. I watch her manipulate the deck and learn about her fascination with the Dark Goddess. For the first time, this gives us (or at least me) a deeper look at her fascination with the occult.

Tanya introduces me to her hamsters, Lucy and Ricky. I am amused by the names she has chosen. I never knew she had a sense of humor nor even a tender side since she never mentioned the existence of these furry little beige creatures.

David introduces me to his mother on Zoom—he and his wife and children are quarantining upstate with his parents. Mrs. S. waves to me and tells me David is nicer to her since he began therapy with me—a chance encounter only experienced in virtual reality. Many of our recent sessions have revolved around David’s feelings of betrayal at his mother’s refusal to acknowledge his grandfather’s sexual

abuse of him as a child. I secretly wonder if David becomes less guilty about expressing his anger to his mother, she may not greet me so cheerfully if we are still quarantining down the road!

A most creative softening of the frame was recounted to me by a friend, a psychoanalyst. Dr. B’s on-the-couch patient did not want to lose the analytic connection. Because the patient lived with his large family, he would head to his car for the session, recline the seat to approximate his analyst’s couch. He also found the right angle to position his cell phone behind his head so Dr. B’s voice was coming to him at just the same angle as in the office.

The Silver Lining

Sharona tells me how not being able to come to my office and see me in person really adds to her feelings of deprivation and scarcity. Sharona, who is not a native English speaker, pronounces scarcity as if it were “Scar City.” How apt, I think!

And, yet, in addition to deprivation and scarcity, patients—as well as colleagues—have reported a silver lining to this lockdown.¹

I have been surprised by the extent of the pleasurable, yet guilty, reactions to the “new normal” of sheltering at home. I refer to those patients who are not sick, have not lost a loved one, and who have sufficient money for now to weather the storm.

And, of course, this could all change if the noose of the virus continues to pull ever tighter on the lives of everyone, if more people get sick or have deepening financial struggles. After acknowledging their anxiety and fear of the unknown, here is what some patients and colleagues have discussed as the silver lining of the corona virus.

Alicia: “My world of rushing and juggling the stress of work, caring

for my sick mother, plus running a household is halted in its tracks for now. I feel like I am breathing freer for the first time in years! No commuting daily on crowded subways, no sitting in packed conference rooms. I spend my days in my pajamas taking care of my work at my own pace. I didn’t even know I had a thing called ‘my own pace.’ I’m used to everything being constantly grueling. I’ve even begun to start exercising at home which feels great. I know I shouldn’t feel that I’m more relaxed while others are suffering, but ironically this quarantining feels like a well needed hiatus from my whole life.”

Paul: “This may sound like a terrible thing to say. But I am relieved that my parents are no longer alive. Trying to cope with my kids all cooped up while my wife and I are both working from home is hard enough. I am glad my parents are spared this crisis and, frankly, that I am spared from having to worry about them.”

Emily: “The biggest worry in my life is FOMO (the fear of missing out). All my friends are always socializing and dating and going out all the time. I’m jealous of them and nervous there won’t be any boys left for me to date if I don’t get over my shyness. Now that everyone is stuck at home, we’re all in the same boat. So, just for now, I don’t have anything to be jealous about. Actually it’s a big relief!”

Sandra: “Last week, we moved our family out of Brooklyn to our house in New Jersey. We have a huge house and, even though my both my son and son-in-law have the virus, we have enough bedrooms to accommodate them in quarantine! I feel so happy to have my grown-up kids back in the house living with us again. The house is lively and being a full-time mother again is giving me a purpose. I used to love my identity of being a full-time mom. I know this won’t last forever,

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and I'll still have to work on figuring out my new empty nest identity. But, for now, it feels like we're in this warm cocoon, and I love it."

Carol: "I got a dog! I've been wanting one for a while but just didn't have the time to train and acclimate a new animal into my busy life with patients coming to my home office. Now that I'm home and only working by internet, it's the perfect time to get myself a maltipoo. I'm in love!"

Ruth: "There are so many sick people in my community, and we're all uniting with group chats and rabbi classes. It's a very uplifting time as well as scary. I believe that so much good is going to come from this time in terms of the way life will continue for everyone hopefully bringing everyone's heads down in terms of money, materialism, extravagance and prioritize what's important with everyone being closer to God. I really believe this, although my doubts and anxiety definitely do creep in."

Jessica: "I'm cooking for the first time in ages! My husband gave me a new cookbook for my birthday last July which I never opened. Now I'm just checking out what I can make. It's a secret pleasure because I know I shouldn't be enjoying myself when others have lost their jobs."

Barbara: "This lockdown at home has been kind of a gift. I'm ashamed to feel that way because a colleague's husband died last week from the virus. But I have to confess that I've been needing to recalibrate my life for a while now, and now I have a chance. I really believe all of us New Yorkers collectively have needed a chance to pause. It would be a crime not to find a way to take advantage of this. What are we all chasing so intensely all the time anyway?"

Ellen: "The concept of finding the silver lining is something that has been helping me through this difficult

time. Many of my patients are expressing similar thoughts and feelings. Early yesterday I took a walk along the river promenade near my home. At one point I sat down on a bench and closed my eyes. After a little while I truly felt that I was sitting on a beautiful beach somewhere—the sounds of seagulls and the water transporting me to a place of calm and quiet. I would never find the time to do something like this when things are 'normal.' May we all find the grace to hold on to these positive changes in our way of being in the world."

Of course, we are not yet done with the quarantine. Things are still fragile, and we cannot predict the future. And yet, I observe that many of my patients—and myself included—have found a small, yet meaningful, slice of silver lining in this situation.

Humor, Resilience and Post Traumatic Growth

Karen says she feels guilty laughing at all the jokes and cartoons that flood her email. We conclude it is good to fight an infectious virus with some infectious laughter.² I'm reminded of the quote by Charlie Chaplin, "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it."

My personal favorite meme is a dejected dog with his head bowed in remorse: "After listening to his human for 12 days in quarantine as she complained for hours on end, Sparky realized he was not cut out to be an emotional support dog."

We work with our clients to instill hope that this pandemic will pass, to strengthen their coping skills and resilience, and find ways to make personal meaning out of this time of lockdown.

Dr. Tian Dayton writes, "Resilient people do have emotional and psychological scars that they carry from their experience. Resilience is not the

ability to escape unharmed. It is the ability to thrive in spite of the odds." Dayton adds, "Resilient people...find reasons—religious, creative, or good common sense—to place a temporary framework and perspective around the problems in their lives."³

We introduce our patients to the idea of post traumatic *growth*, and we ask how they envision what that would look like for them.

FAROL

(feelings about reentering our lives)

There is FOMO (fear of missing out) and now I've coined the term FAROL (feelings about reentering our lives). Farol in Spanish means a lantern that illuminates.

My stepson Sean tells me, "When it's over, I want to import into my life the things I've discovered during lockdown that are making me happy—like not rushing around as much."

I add, "Yes! And then let's export the things that haven't been working." Sean and I agree laughingly that we will be entering the import-export business when all this is over.

And I think of the words of T. S. Eliot which seem so comforting at this time, "Teach me to care. Teach me not to care. Teach me to be still."⁴

At 7 PM every night, my neighbors in Park Slope emerge from their homes to clap for the health care and essential workers. This clapping has evolved to hooting, banging pots and pans and, recently, someone brought out a large beaded African drum. For a brief two minutes, the cloistered neighbors emerge from their cocoons, stand on their stoops, and begin to cheer. For two minutes, we become a village of caring and connected souls. I wish this tribute to humanity continues even after we're all healed. 🎵

All names and identifying data have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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