

Panic, Pantheism or Panoptics Through a Pandemic

Standing outside this afternoon, on the edge of Spring, I took a long moment to lift my eyes up to the Blue Ridge as clouds drifted silently through the trees. My eyes and ears were drawn to a brown thrasher singing on a low branch, soon joined by a cardinal, mockingbird and Carolina wren in a colorful chorus from the greening pasture across the fence.

Observing these sights and sounds of nature I felt the delight that comes with knowing the world is much greater and grander than the human species. At the same moment, I felt the dread that comes with our frailty, the disease, death and human ignorance that threaten us, fearfully driving so much of our life and living—the endemic fear that surfaces in times of danger, disorder and disruption.

Panic: *sudden uncontrollable fear or anxiety, often causing wildly unthinking behavior. From Greek *panikos*, from the name of the god Pan, noted for causing terror, to whom woodland noises were attributed.*

Mixed in with those feelings and thoughts as the birds were singing and the sunlight was pushing through the low clouds, I considered my good friend Dan undergoing cancer surgery this day on the other side of the country. In significant ways, I credit Dan's model of ministry and irreverent humor for the beginnings of my own liberating emergence from ministry and faith. No one was more supportive; no one more "real" about the distractions of theology and church ritual. While millions of us are caught up in the scare of a pandemic—one virus spreading over the cellular landscape—millions more are facing their personal suffering right now, attacks on their bodies and minds from within and without.

We need that context. At least I do.

Linda alerted me to this comment on an article in the NYT: "*Yesterday I went deep into nature and you know what? It was unaware of any pandemic. To the beach! To the forest! To the wild places and you will know the joy we are meant to know as human beings.*"

My first response was how silly that is. Our anthropomorphic imaginations run amok in the outdoors. Nature was "unaware." Yes, but it's never aware of anything at anytime. But I get the point and this person is obviously identifying the necessity of turning to the natural world when things gets crazy and we feel out of control—because, of

course, we aren't really in control of the planet anyway. So, we are thrown back on our humanness, our need for the natural wild, that is, our own wildness.

Someone asked if it was safe to go walking on a trail during the time of “distancing” and “sheltering.” I smiled. Nature is perhaps the best place to be right now (we can’t wash our hands of the dirty earth anyway). We’re hindered by our panicky paranoia, the uncertainty of things, hence our “wildly unthinking behavior,” generated by irrational rumor, woodland noises or our gods.

Pantheism: *identifying god with the universe.*

Some turn to a kind of pantheist view in times of uncertainty. A creative divinity is present and active in everything everywhere. Strangely, there is a kinship to the fundamentalist view that God is present and in charge. Either way, nature is overseen by a Higher or Deeper Power and we can rest in that. But we can never seem to rest. The “sacred” and “spiritual” always draws attention from what’s at hand, right before our eyes, or in our bodies.

I would suggest another path, an alternative trail, in facing the fearsome phobias. It’s the neat, simple term:

Panoptic: *showing or seeing the whole at one view; from Greek: all seeing.*

Being panoptic is getting a wider viewpoint, a greater vision of the whole picture. Can we do that? Not entirely, but we can do our best to use a panoramic lens to understand our circumstances better.

Gleaned from the naturalistic wisdom of Thoreau and Muir, panopticism is a way of choosing to see ourselves as a part, but not the central part, of the order (or chaos) of things. *We are wild and our bodies as well as minds are wilderness.* Crazy? Not so much. Biologists tell us we only know a fraction of the species on the planet, and we are, essentially, bacteria—there are more bacteria cells on and in the human body than there are human cells. Amazing! Astounding! But doesn’t need to be confounding, or frightening. It’s just the way things are.

Pandemic: at this moment in time we certainly know what that means, and how our lives are affected so widely and wildly by something as microscopic as a virus—*invisibilia.* How do we handle this attack on our body and the body of Humanity? We

can choose to panic and suffer more through the associated irrational behavior. We can decide it's all under control since divine activity is involved—and harming the environment is a form of deicide.

Or, we pause, take a deep breath, maybe listen to the birdsongs, and make up our minds to be panoptic. We listen to the experts, the health professionals and scientists who know something about these natural “wee beasties.” And we can choose to think about ourselves as wild creatures, interconnected with all other wild things, including viruses. We have to find ways of adapting or natural selection will favor the smallest living things and we will be host and compost for generations of new life. *Que sera sera.*

Before he left the pastorate himself (still serving as a sheriff's chaplain), Dan used to end Sunday morning church with “Worship is over; let the service begin!” Now, that seems like a good secular call as well—a benediction for a more human, humane, humanistic way of living in service to others, our world and ourselves, for the good of all, for the health of the many.

Stay safe. Be well.

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