

On Life at the Edge of the Unknown: A Systems-Centered Approach to Life and Leadership in Pandemic Times

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For many of us who cut our teeth in crisis ministry, the early days of the spring of 2020 brought focus and clarity of purpose or at least some sense of familiarity as we drew on skills that served us well in late-night emergency room visits: a calm and steady presence, making good-enough decisions, and being willing to alter our course as new information comes in. Taking breaks, remembering to breathe, and drinking plenty of water kept our minds focused and our bodies alert. As I met virtually with my CPE colleagues across the country, I saw how hundreds of faithful decisions supported students in finishing units and allowed for the spiritual care of countless patients, family members, and staff colleagues, all while attempting to stay vigilant against the new viral threat. Focusing on the next right thing ensured our very survival and the survival of our field.

But those early days have turned into weeks and into months. Early rushes of adrenaline have subsided, and heightened cortisol levels have become our new normal. Pandemic life has become a chronic condition.

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As the acute becomes chronic, we can begin to notice the ways that our survival instincts, designed to keep threats at bay, in fact limit our opportunity for growth. Old survival patterns may keep us alive when the threat level is high, but they also keep us stagnant or stuck. Systems-centered theory offers a lens for understanding these defenses and tools for emerging from them.¹ Its practices keep me grounded in the reality of the here and now. Clarity about what we know and what we don't, accurately assessing the sources of our information, and resisting the urge to fill in the gaps in our knowledge with fantasies are all strategies that help to inoculate us against the dangers of negative predictions and allow us to access the full range of our cognitive and affective wisdom.

As one pandemic has become two and makes plain the fractures in our society, psychic resources are apt to grow thin. Level-headedness about facing all of the unknowns is both vital and nearly impossible to sustain. We learn more each day about the physical manifestations of the novel coronavirus—how it spreads, how it's best treated, the damage it wreaks on the human body. The pandemic of racism, illuminated for many by the death of George Floyd, is not novel. Centuries of history and lived experience have brought expertise to many, while countless more of us have closed our eyes to this knowledge, preferring instead our fantasies of self-evident truths that "all men are created equal." White people, and those who have lived in relative comfort and ease, are beginning to reckon with our capacity for self-delusion. Unknowns buffet us from all sides—the sensory, the scientific, and the social and even from within our own souls.

Political polarization has amplified the experience of threat from all these unknowns. Neighbors and families are at odds as the news cycle is dominated by yelling and outright lies. Other people become caricatures, and we ourselves do too as we seek to keep out any differences real or perceived. Real and deep human suffering is ignored or exploited. We have lost the opportunities for collective rituals of grief.

In the midst of all of this, it is easy to write a narrative of negative predictions: hundreds of thousands dead, countless others besieged by lingering life-limiting symptoms, and debilitating moral injury to those on the front lines; no more jovial family gatherings; White people's urgent insistence on change followed by a predictable lack of stamina amidst racial stress. I find these predictions to be crafty and deceptive, convincing me that they are actually sophisticated analyses or sharp professional judg-

ments. And although this negative line of thought may have ensured survival somewhere along the developmental journey, its usefulness quickly expires. As I think of my role at ACPE as one who attends to the growth and the flourishing of the system as a whole, it is most evident to me that these survival defenses may have been necessary for a time but now must be shed in order for us to grow and adapt.

Harder and more faithful is standing tall and open-eyed, facing into the unknown with courage and hope. The edge of the unknown is the place of potential, where energy enlivens us and transformation can occur. It is at this place that we can access the wisdom of our hearts and minds and bodies. This is a place of power. And this is the particular expertise that we pastoral educators have and that the world so desperately needs: the ability to look inward in honest self-reflection while at the same time recognizing and integrating deep difference.

This stance is very hard to sustain in the best of times. And it is downright impossible to sustain alone. Indeed, isolation raises the stakes, and all those old survival defenses clamor to make themselves known. The antidote, for me, is to find a subgroup to discuss and metabolize my experience with. Whether I find an explicitly systems-centered theory functional subgroup or an implicit subgroup that draws on my experience, having someone in my boat can calm my threatened psyche and depersonalize the experience enough so that I may begin to understand all the inputs as valuable information. Intricate webs of connection and support strengthen and grow, like a railway map that makes cross-country travel seem easy. This web emboldens me to face into life at the edge of the unknown.

Drawing on the wisdom of the web, individual growth and transformation never remains solely an individual act. Our systems influence one another and will grow (or stagnate) together. Indeed, our willingness to recognize and dismantle old survival patterns in favor of a more complex consciousness is the gift of our professional lineage and the very thing this world so desperately needs now. We are here for such a time as this.

NOTES

- 1 For more information about systems-centered theory, see Yvonne M. Agazarian, *Systems-Centered Therapy for Groups* (London: Karnac, 2004). Or, see the website of the Systems-Centered Training & Research Institute at www.systemscentered.com for resources and training opportunities.