

7 Potential Gains From COVID-19

If survivors take the lessons to heart

By Todd Svanoe

For 25 years as a journalist and consultant to 60-plus urban ministries in the nation's most-broken neighborhoods, I've watched many a phoenix rise from the ashes.

Oh are we needing that resilience now.



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There's no sugar-coating it. The cumulative depressive effect of the coronavirus on a nation of shut-ins, without their healthy routines, is beginning to take a toll.

- A masked woman in my grocery angrily erupts, "That's not 6 feet!" to shocked sweaty contractors breezing through to buy a drink.
- A Walgreens employee, learning that my girlfriend is a mental health professional, pulls her over for free consulting. "What do I say to a customer who asks if two of these pills will kill you?"

- There have been 11 suicides last week within 30 miles of my small community of Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

So far, as usual, most of us are turning away from these grim realities. Tired health workers and activists heroically respond and pull double shifts. A church worker recruited me this week for food delivery to shut-ins and refugees, prepared by a café deli that refuses to be sidelined. But soon we'll all have to face the pain.

"In national crises," wrote David Brooks for *The Atlantic*, "a sort of social and psychological arms race takes place."

The threat — whether bombings or a pandemic — ramps up fear, unpredictability, divisiveness, fatalism, and feelings of weakness and meaninglessness. Nations survive when they can ramp up countervailing emotions and mindsets...when they foster social solidarity by paying extreme attention to fairness. This happens when they intensify social connection and create occasions for social bonding and shared work.

Unfortunately, Brooks suggests, a quarantined US populace entered the crisis already diminished by insecurities and mistrust, and has "catastrophically low levels of all these things."

Most of us know that our nation's social and psychological immune system — steady habits of calming mindfulness, spiritual rootedness, and the safety net of bonded neighbors who we know have our back — is compromised and vulnerable.

The bounce-back pluck of Spring. But it's no time for doom and gloom, and if there's something I've learned in 50-some years on this planet, the Midwest's frozen tundra always yields to a tulip-filled spring; floods and tornados bring out the work-crew best in us, and the hope of April's Passover freedom and Easter resurrection take on whole-world overtones that nourish the entire community.

It's time to be inspired by that grace and hope and let it re-form us into better people.

1. Embrace your neighbors. I've seen too much of that bounce-back pluck we call resilience to think we'll be down and out. No, we'll be down and back up, like a muddy beached buoy, happily deployed to a thawed lake, and returned to its life-saving purpose. Humans in crisis rebound, and rediscover their life purpose, even if they must be coaxed back into loving their neighbors.



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2. Choose good habits. But whether we're religious or not, we have to choose calm over anxiety, involvement over passivity, and love over fear. We have to be part of the solution. "Nations survive when they can *ramp up* countervailing emotions and mindsets."

3. Replace the real plague with service and gratitude. It's the perfect time to admit the inadequacy of cynicism, distrust and mean-spiritedness that have been the real plague of this century. It's time to commit to healthy lifestyles of service and the practice of gratitude to "ramp up" our immune system.

As Coronavirus deaths spike and reach closer to home, are you among those feeling record levels of anxiety, fear or despair? That can be good.

In story after story in the circles of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, those who have hit bottom give thanks for "the gift of desperation," when they've seen, in its rawest form, the kind of underequipped person they *don't* want to be.

4. Admit our limitations. These AA men and women find their first mental and emotional "ramp up" after confessing they are "powerlessness without God." Ironically they are often relegated to church basements when maybe they should be in our pulpits, streaming sermons to our living rooms, of course.

One writer suggests that our quarantined nation is now in an extended Good Friday, an hour of decision about whether to blame or rebound. For those who have forgotten, or never knew, Good Friday is the painful day this week that Christian worshippers enter into the depth of sorrow and despair, recalling Jesus' crucifixion, when his disciples' hope was gone.

5. Pray for and restore confidence. It may seem impossible, when the chips are not just down but off the table, to believe that our nation can arise from our crisis of confidence — confidence in our leadership, in each other, or in ourselves. But Brooks suggests it's time to build that inner strength and resilience.

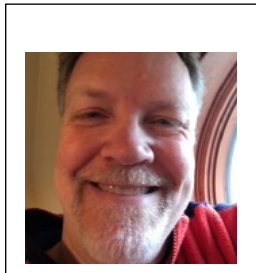
Resilience does not come from mindless optimism, or from people telling one another to be calm amid the turmoil. Resilience is built when people confront a threat realistically, and discover that they have the resources to cope with it together. Resilience is built when people tell a collective story about the danger

that places the current terror they are facing within a larger redemptive context. *When all this is over, we'll be better because of it.*

6. Drop passivity and demonizing. This isn't a time to simply wait, gawk at T.V. coverage of health workers, and debate when the quarantine should be over. This is a time, the perfect time, to search our souls, to use the only full week of solitude we may ever get again, to decide that we'll face life's adversities, not buckle; cultivate attitudes of neighborliness, not demonize; and come out of this stronger.

7. Adopt a redemptive purpose. I was blessed to marry into a Jewish family whose compassionate alpha dog, now in his 90's, literally cries at the state of the world and asks us, "What are you next generations going to do to make the world better?" If you push him on it, he'll admit he's an atheist, while I'm a devout believer. But empathetically we share what George Eliot called "a broad fellow feeling with all that is human," and a commitment to live on purpose. And that is what we all have the unique opportunity to cultivate out of the ashes of this moment.

If we do, our brush with death will have served a purpose, and a phoenix of new hope will rise.



Todd Svanoe is a seasoned journalist, urban ministry consultant, and aspiring retreat leader in spiritual resilience.

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