

Almost a year into this pandemic, and almost everything still feels strange. Our routines remain disrupted. Many are not going to work, the playground, the gym. We have lost jobs or have been forced to take pay cuts. Many of us have not been to Mass for months, and some poor souls have been left to die alone in hospitals because of fear of the disease, and funerals have been postponed or radically reduced in size.

In such peculiar times, it is natural to take a hard look at our priorities. Do we prioritize differently now because of the change in circumstances? Has the change in circumstances revealed to us that our priorities were somewhat askew? It seems that the virus has made concern with our health much more urgent than it was before the outbreak.

C.S. Lewis gave a sermon called "Learning in War-Time" in the fall of 1939, which addressed an analogous, and equally disorienting, shift in priorities. This was the outset of World War II. The question he proposed – what use is it to study – that is, to carry on with an activity that seems at best not a matter of urgency and at worst a costly and distracting luxury, during wartime?

Lewis' talk provides much-needed perspective in light of our current circumstances. He wrote: "I think it is important to try to see the present calamity in a true perspective. The war creates absolutely no permanent human situation; it simply exaggerates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to live under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself...We are mistaken when we compare war (*pandemic*) with 'normal life.' Life has never been normal. Even those periods which we think most tranquil, like the 19th century, turn out, on closer inspection, to be full of crises, alarms, difficulties, emergencies..."

What happens is that we have a heightened perception of the reality – and importance of death. This pandemic changes our perspective by bringing what is potentially very far from us potentially very close to us. But the relative proximity of a thing does not radically change its nature. War and disease do not change *whether* we are going to die; they only change *when* we might die.

Without the threat of imminent death, we can delude ourselves into thinking that death is not going to happen, or we can simply neglect to think about death at all. (Check point for honestly answering this question – DO WE HAVE A WILL? AND IF SO, IS IT UP-TO-DATE? AND DID WE LEAVE ANYTHING TO THE PARISH WE WILL ASK TO ASSIST US THROUGH THIS GREAT PASSAGE?) If death is decades away, it is not urgent. If it is potentially only 2 weeks away, then all of a sudden death becomes an urgent concern for us. The question is: Does that make sense? After all, viewed from the standpoint of the lifespan of nations, or civilizations, or species, or Earth itself, the difference between 2 weeks and a few decades vanishes into nothing.

The reality is that much of our lives is caught up in pursuits that, at bottom, have no other purpose than to keep us from thinking about our own mortality. Why do we shop? Are we made happy once we buy something? Perhaps, temporarily. But not permanently happy. It is a diversion, an activity that allows us to avoid the contemplation of death, to stave off anxiety about our mortality for a time.

Death stands as the ultimate rebuke to our thinking of ourselves as radically free. Most commentators on our society say that we have become a culture of death-deniers. For example, we color our hair, trying to eliminate signs of aging from our bodies, and if we are wealthier, we turn to more sophisticated methods from Botox to plastic surgery.

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War – or disease – really just exaggerates what is already the human condition, a condition that we normally succeed in not thinking too much about. As Lewis says, “Do not let your nerves and emotions lead you into thinking your predicament more abnormal than it really is.”

Lewis notes THREE issues which war (or pandemic) raises up. First, excitement – the tendency to think about the pandemic when we had intended to think about our work. There are always plenty of rivals to our work. If we let ourselves, we shall always be waiting for some distraction or other before we can get down to our work. With Facebook, Twitter, and 24-hour cable news, daily case and death counts – we have an endless variety of distractions/excitements.

There is a difference between a responsible desire to be well-informed about the virus—and an obsession about it.

The second issue is frustration, “The feeling that we shall not have time to finish.” How will the pandemic change our lives? Our country? The church? The world? While we have international news on all of this, we still only have so much ability to affect things. The internet has monstrously increased our vision – while giving us only a tiny increase in the power to act and affect things. Lewis advises: “Leave futurity in God’s hands. We may as well, for God will certainly retain it whether we leave it to him or not. Never, in peace or war, commit your virtue or happiness to the future. Happy work is best done by the one who takes their long-term plans somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment ‘as to the Lord.’ It is only our daily bread that we are encouraged to ask for.” In other words, do the best with what is at hand now and is in our power to do.

Third, fear: “What does war (pandemic) do to death? It certainly does not make it more frequent; 100 % of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased. It puts several deaths earlier, but I hardly suppose that death is what we fear.” So what do we fear from COVID? After all, most deaths involve suffering, even suffering as acute as that experienced by those who contract COVID. Our lives may be shortened by the virus; but it is unlikely that at the point of death, many of us would have found death to be more peaceful simply because we had lived longer.

And Lewis has prescient words about what war or pandemic DO change: “Yet war (pandemic) does do something to death. It forces us to remember it. The only reason why the cancer at 60 or the paralysis at 75 do not bother us is that we forget them. War (pandemic) makes death real to us, and that would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. They thought it good to be always aware of our mortality.”

As disciples of Christ, a situation like pandemic or war invites us to cling more deeply to the consolation, hope and good news of the savior who defeated sin and death. Now more than ever, a strong interior life of friendship with God through prayer will help us to counteract the negative effects of the pandemic. Sometimes suffering has the power to show us the truth that is hard to see in times of prosperity.

We claim our hope – and stand firm in faith. (adapted from Thomas P. Harmon, “Reading C.S. Lewis in the Time of Covid,” in AMERICA, November 2020, p. 56-60)