Emerging from the ‘COVID Cocoon’

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

A SELF-CARE Perspective

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Hello. My name is Gary Stuckey. I am the Minister of the Seacliff Uniting Church as well as being a Spiritual Director and Retreat Leader. The perspective I am addressing in the ‘Emerging from the COVID Cocoon’ Series is “what can we learn from this time of COVID-19 about the importance of maintaining Self-Care and our individual well-being”.

When I was in High School I remember conducting an experiment called “The Collapsing Can Experiment.” You’ve probably seen it done; the way we did it was to place a small amount of water in a sealable can, we used the old sort of Milo tins, and placed it over a heat source. The water boiled with some of it evaporating as steam. It was then that we replaced the lid and removed it from the heat. As the contents of the can cooled, the can collapsed quite spectacularly.

Under normal circumstances the air pressure inside the can and the air pressure outside are equal with the result being that the can retains its shape. However, when the water inside the can is heated it is filled with steam pushing the air out. When the lid is placed back on and the steam cools and condenses into water, the pressure inside the can is less than that outside. The result is the collapsing can.

The air pressure inside the can cannot resist the air pressure outside the can and so it is able to be crushed.

What has that to do with emerging from a COVID-Cocoon?

From about March, the impact of the COVID-19 virus meant that our lives were changed quite dramatically almost overnight. For many people, perhaps most, that added to the external pressure in their lives. The uncertainty about the future, the anxiety which led to panic buying and the isolation felt as our movements and contacts were restricted had an adverse effect on people’s sense of well-being.
This has impacted on people to varying degrees. For some there was a mild sense of unease. For others there were more severe consequences.

In a way the COVID-19 situation is only one circumstance, albeit an acute one, in which we have to deal with the pressures of life. We cannot escape these pressures; they are a part of day to day life. What we can do, and one of the lessons I think we have learnt or been reminded of in this unusual time, is to be aware of engaging in appropriate self-care. In terms of the collapsing can, what can we do to minimise the external pressures we feel and what can we do to enhance our internal reserves which strengthen us to counter the external pressures and maintain our well-being?

COVID-19 has reminded us that we cannot always control the external pressures that come to us in the course of our lives. However, I have noticed that some people at least are minimising the impact of these pressures by re-evaluating their involvements and time commitments. I have heard from more than one person that they are finding a freedom in these times because they are not being overloaded with all sorts of external pressures. True, we didn’t have much of a choice about many of these decisions. We were forced into a situation where we couldn’t adopt a life as normal approach. But many have found that they are not missing some of the activities and commitments they’ve had to let go and have a feeling of lightness for having let these go. No doubt some of these will be picked up again when we are able to resume more day to day activities. But it might be a good time to ask ourselves: Have we taken on too great a load in our lives? Have we added to the pressures we feel by over-committing ourselves? Is all that we are doing good or necessary? Perhaps we will find as we emerge from these days that we can reduce some of our external pressures.

You might like to pause the video at this point, and after each of the following questions, as I invite you to reflect.
Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Can you identify external pressures on your life either in this COVID time or in your general life experience?
2. How are you at responding to expectations placed upon you? Why do you think you respond in this way?
3. What is it that you really want to do and what can you let go? Is there something you no longer want to hold to but can’t let it go? Reflect on why this may be? What is important for you to hold on to?

However, as with the collapsing can, external pressure is only one half of the matter. The other half is about the lack of any compensating force inside the can enabling it to resist the pressure from outside.

What happens when the water is boiled and then cooled is that it creates a partial vacuum in the can; a sort of void and emptiness. To resist the external pressures which can crush us we need internal strength. So, in addition to considering what external pressures we can reduce, we also reflect on what we can do to enhance our inner well-being.

In this we take our lead from Jesus. As we read the Gospels we often find Jesus engaged in the active ministry of teaching, preaching, healing or arguing with various opponents. All these are activities in which Jesus expends his energies. Then, at numerous points, we find that he goes off by himself to retreat and pray. He re-centres himself and nourishes his inner being, and then he returns to his active life.

I wonder if we would be wise to learn from this? We all know that anything which expends energy will need to replenish it. A car needs to refuel for example. It is the same with the human person. We need to take time to enrich our inner being; to restore our energies.
How we do this will vary from person to person, but the important thing is we do it. In my spiritual direction work, particularly when someone comes feeling worn out or even headed to burnout, I ask them the simple question; what gives you life? What is it that makes them feel most alive? Often people will know what this something is, but it is frequently an aspect of their life that has been neglected.

One of the reasons we neglect the life giving aspects of our being is because it can seem too self-focussed. We can easily feel guilty in taking time for ourselves. I would suggest, though, that self-care is not selfish; rather it is necessary not only for our well-being but also that we can be of assistance to others. We are no good to anybody if our inner reserves are all used up.

Again I invite you to pause the video and spend some time in pondering on all or some of the following reflections.

**Reflection/Discussion Questions**

1. You may like to contemplate some of the Gospel texts in which Jesus retreats to strengthen his inner being, for example; Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35-39, Luke 6:12 & 9:18.
2. How would you answer the question, “What gives you life?” Do you give attention to this part of yourself? If not, why is that so?
3. Reflect on the following quote from Parker Palmer: “Self-care is never a selfish act- it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others.”
In conclusion

I hope you found that helpful. In the printed material which accompanies this series you will find further exercises for reflection to help you explore self-care.

While the COVID disruption to our lives was not desired by anyone it has, I hope and pray, given us the opportunity to reflect on our lives. I have heard many people comment that they have appreciated the quieter pace of life during this time and have learnt, or re-learnt, the value of things like silence, solitude and reflection. There are positive elements to emerge from this time that will be good to carry forward. Perhaps one will be the awareness that taking care of ourselves is not a luxury but necessity, not only for ourselves but for all around us. God bless you as you emerge from this COVID cocoon.

Further reading

An excellent little book (just over 100 pages) is Let Your Life Speak by Parker Palmer. The book asks the question: is the life that I am living the life that wants to live in me? The contention is that too often we live our lives from the outside in, that is, adopting and conforming to expectations placed upon us. The invitation is to live from the inside out, listening to the deep voice within us which calls us to our authentic life.
About the Presenter

I am currently serving as the Minister in the Seacliff Uniting Church. I have been ordained for 38 years having serviced churches in South Australia and Western Australia. Until 2016 I was the Director of the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre and minister of the Stillpoint Faith Community. I am also a Spiritual Director, Retreat Leader and Teacher of Meditation. As an adjunct faculty member of Uniting College I have taught in the area of Christian spirituality.

My lifelong love of learning has led to the attaining of a Diploma of Divinity (MCD), Bachelor of Arts (Murdoch Uni), Master of Ministry (ACD) and Doctor of Ministry (ACD).

One of my passions is to introduce people to the spiritual riches of the monastic/contemplative tradition of the Christian Church as a means to enrich their own spiritual journey. It is from this perspective that I offer my reflections on attending to our inner well-being for this ‘Emerging from the COVID Cocoon’ series. I hope and pray you will find it helpful.

Peace,

Gary Stuckey (Rev.)

Feel free to copy and use this following material as you wish
**SOME EXERCISES IN SELF-CARE**

When we feel that life has become too busy and it is having a negative effect on our wellbeing, what can we do? Look through the following exercises which have the purpose of enriching your inner life.

*Choose one area which draws you and consider how you can put it into practice.*

**Rest**

Take a break. Take time off, Call time out.

Plan ahead to when you can take some time off.

*How do you feel when you take time off?*

*Is it a good experience?*

*Do you feel guilty? Uneasy? Why might this be so? Is that a sufficient reason?*

**Recreation**

What is it that recharges your batteries? How long is it since you have done something for the sheer enjoyment of it?

*What did you like doing as a child? Can you engage in that activity again?*

*Or is there some other recreational activity which enlivens you?*

**Refusal**

Learn to say ‘No’.

*Do you have trouble saying ‘No’?*

*Do you sometimes say ‘Yes’ when you’d rather say ‘No’?*

*Why do you do this?*

**Reflection**

This is the art of learning to stop and ponder more deeply the important things of life. To meditate, pray, be open to God.

*When could you take time to do this?*

*Do you have a favourite place to do this?*

**Relationships**

Spending time with the special people in our lives is often pushed out when we become too busy.

*With whom do you want to spend some time?*

*Whose company do you enjoy?*

*When could this happen?*