



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Positively Outraged with COVID: An Open Letter to the Coronavirus

Kenneth Ngwa, *Drew Theological School*

Blog Series: Praxis: The Responsive & Expanding Classroom

April 30, 2020

Tags: communal learning | teaching and learning during crisis | justice teaching

March, 2020

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the Lord, before his fierce anger (Jer. 4:23-26, NRSV)

Positively Outraged.

Hello, COVID-19:

Yes. I said, "Hello." I still have my manners. You, on the other hand, are rude.

You burst onto the global scene, rampaging across spaces and time zones, bearing death with you and compelling individuals and entire communities and nations to "shut down," to become diseased, misaligned, and dis-eased. I am not infected with you. I am affected by your boorish behavior and way of being. I am *positively* outraged because wherever you reside, physical

death or a heightened threat of physical death manifests in the form of social death – “ghost towns” are left in your wake, or in anticipation of your arrival, as visual remains of your invasion.

I am *positively* outraged because you compel internal alienation. You force me to run away from my multiplicity, to become alienated from it and to see it as a threat to my existence. I must retreat from public spaces into private quarters. I am forced into exile, barred from towns and schools and churches and synagogues and mosques and malls and stadiums; from those places and times where the routineness of life intersects with modes and forms of communal art and ritual, with shared affect and accountability, and with corporate play and carnival. And now – because of you, because of your mode of public presence – the burden to secure and nourish the survival of my kind falls on the shoulders of a few – those who provide “essential” services. They must now do their jobs with the added anxiety of knowing that contact with another of us might strike a death nail. Visits to the grocery store are anxiety ridden – should it potentially cost life to go and purchase a loaf of bread and juice? Six-foot separation is the road I must travel, in order to avoid going six-feet under. This pollution, this outrageous burden, that you have unleashed cannot be inhaled.

You fouler of the air – which belongs to nobody but which everybody must have – will not permit social intimacy in the daylight and, so, I perform forms of Passover in the night as sheltered existence for survival. You restrict my ability to think BIG in the BIG places and BIG waves that have shaped what until now has been my life. Instead, I must think BIG from behind closed doors, sitting in front of small screens – tv, tablet, phone; technological BIGNESS that shrinks space and time, and puts it all at my fingertips. Do you realize the kind of ideological and epistemological heresy and horror that this can produce? The world at my fingertips? I have learned that this kind of consolidated power is ominous, and can be deadly when put solely, singularly, into the wrong hands. The world is a darkened nervous place, not because we have chosen it but because your presence compels it upon us.

I am *positively* outraged. Nations of people flee robust urban centers to remote urban spaces. But you are the monster inside of we. Already inside of we. A part of the world around me. And you insist on becoming incarnational in the forms of job losses and food insecurity and illness and sudden death, while you also bully us into cramped corners and steal our breath. This offends we. While inside, you take away the things we have learned to depend on, the things that have nourished us: experiencing material interconnectedness with others as a resource, not a risk; celebrating the fleshiness of existence and its modes of fleshy social and communal intimacy; social education from the rich traditions – handed down from our forebears – about sitting under the palm tree or out front on the yard, with large amounts of food and palm wine to feed all – immediate and long distant relatives and friends. Because of your assault on these things, I freak out. I panic. What should I do? And then you force me – us – to take my – our – anxieties and anguish home to secluded places. The moral pandemic that your presence generates ends up lodged in secluded physical, spiritual and social places – the places where the poor and marginalized live. This makes my blood boil. I am too closed-in with family and friends to strike out. If this keeps up many of us might end up permanently lodged in the

underside of history.

I am *positively* outraged because you have also attacked our social nervous system and, so, it is possible that we'll mistake survival for virtue. It is when we make proclamations that detach time from place or that attempt to throw this moment and every moment of communal trauma into social amnesia - as if it didn't happen, or as if the future belongs only to those who survive this moment unscathed - those who are able to afford the costly price of admission advance into that future. But because that future is deadly costly, you have placed the proverbial tree of the knowledge of good and evil next to the tree of life, forcing nurses and doctors in medical centers to make horrendous choices between saving one life and letting go the other. Because of your seemingly insatiable desire for bodies - your propensity to consume the bodies you infect - the tempting fruit of survival is etched to the austerity and deficiency you represent, and, then, placed next to *the tree of lives*. You COVID have forced us to create from austerity; you have deprived us of multiplicity, and I resent this trespass!

I am told that you have a family and that we have met before. Are you the trunk of your nuclei family tree, or are you its crown? We remember your family visit from the 1918 influenza wave, and - much closer to your genealogical birth date - the HIV/AIDS outbreak in the 1980s. Your visits seem to be happening with greater frequency - or our consciousness of your presence seems to be picking up pace. Over the past 20 years, we have encountered your kin many times: Anthrax in 2001, SARS in 2003, Salmonella and E-coli in 2008, H1N1 in 2009, MERS in 2012 (and 2015), Ebola in 2014, Zika in 2016, to name a few. In fact, since ancient times, your family has made spectacular and spectacularly damaging visits to the human species, sometimes because we ourselves violated the ecosystem, and other times because we chose to abuse your role as virus among breathing creatures. Your arrival in 2019 hit an already sore nerve in our communal body, which is still reeling from the afterlives of your predecessor-kin virus outbreaks. And that soreness reminds us that we will encounter you again.

Our bodies have kept the score, as Bessel van der Kolk has taught us. With each return from you, we face the mental pressures that come with uncertainty about who has, and who doesn't have, a part of you - who you have or haven't invaded to take. Some have survived your invasion, and may form the basis for our herd immunity. Yet, news feeds have live updates of the increasing number of infections and deaths. Many hospitals and funeral homes are overwhelmed because you - COVID - are quickly relocating many bodies from homes to hospitals to funeral homes or ice trucks and to mass graves. The pace is astounding - and likely underreported. In the process, you are reshaping visual and material representations of our collective psychosocial and communal body. Empty streets, parks, schools, restaurants, churches, houses, mosques, and synagogues; overcrowded hospitals and mortuaries; overworked medical officials and farmers and sanitation workers; mentally and emotionally exhausted friends and kin and neighbors, all trying new and old ways of gathering, searching for lost or broken or abandoned places and neighbors. You have caused many to depart from us. Somehow, in their untimely departures, they have taken parts of us. Their departures have produced something of a new coveting in us.

From Positive Outrage to Riposte: COVET THIS

Affected by COVID-19, I begin to COVET anew, and desire takes me to back to my future in community.

I COVET belonging - the kind that has formed me and formed the things you are taking.

Hear me. I am an African descended biblical scholar. This means, among other things, that I tend to think in waves, often from the backside, the other side, of communal survival and flourishing. I am the product of a community of colleagues and parents and friends and children and siblings who have taught me how to covet communal health, how to read and interpret written and oral texts by also paying attention to the cracks of history, and to those who live on the other side of history's "official" tracks. It is learning from a history and a life of grit and pain and grief and tears, of mass graves and genocide and holocaust and Maafa. It is also learning from a history and life of joy and generosity; a history of the creative side of politics and religion; a history of Ubuntu and its epistemological preference for communal life and wellbeing.

Understand we. I COVET meaningful listening. Through our griots and seers, our ancestors and our yet unborn children, the harshness of historical colliding is wrestled and transitioned into tangible imagination. It is not a trick of the mind, a fantastic escape mechanism. No. It is a marshalling of communal attention and focus, a calming of the restless and bitter soul, a tuning of our communal radars, a widening of our peripheral vision, and a listening to the rhythms and rhymes of history and herstory - all in order to distinguish between different kinds of tears running down many cheeks. Are they tears of joy or of sorrow? I have learned that to read the flowing tears of a people without attention to the causes and afterlives of those tears is to misread. That is what one of our brightest minds, Toni Morrison, told us about and named rememory.

Rememory me. I COVET interpretation. Great artists, lyrical composers and prophets have taught me how to read your rueful visitation. A Psalmist's inquiry as to how responses to history's horrors are etched and coded into the communal, spatial, epistemological, and spiritual body and, also, unto *The Book*; Moses and Jeremiah writing the "laws of history" on hard, rocky, and brittle stone tablets, as well as on the rhythmic movements of powerful human heart muscles; Ezekiel speaking and working, like an African medicine-man, trying to transform dry bones into a fleshy-lively-strong community; Miriam in prophetic laboring and ritual chanting to heal a plagued and socially distanced community that is struggling to come to terms with surrounding dead bodies and polluted waters. This interpretive struggle - this coveting of something new - connects liberating genealogy, story and mythology. That is how I understand the ancient biblical Hebrews summoning their *warrior* and *breasted one* to address the advent and manifestation of a wave of plagues during their struggle for freedom. I know why the ancient Greeks asked Hephaestus to grapple with similar questions of communal wellbeing. I can follow the narrative of the First Gospel and see Jesus's healing act of a single uncontrollable man that lived among the tombs, refocused into the quelling of rampaging

legions hogged up inside of him. During a period of turmoil, citizens of the medieval kingdom of Old Mali used the epic of Sundiata Keita to ask similar questions about the intersection of deformed bodies, political ambitions, Islamic and traditional African rituals, the powers of griots and the healing powers of a baobab tree. This is what I know; this is how I desire to know.

Watch us. Stingy and singular, you - COVID - cannot be my teacher. Survival with you makes space and place and time rare commodities; they are made rarer by political, spiritual, economic and cultural demoniacs who find shelter inside those with compromised immunity or those of different demographic constituencies and, then, jump off the cliff. Decades and centuries of colonialism and racism and xenophobia and ecological abuse taught us how to wash and sanitize and mask against the monstrosity of a singularizing now-moment that manifests as a trauma that doesn't go away. Vacating our public spaces, we withdraw from a bountiful and crowded world, stilled at last. Then rememory kicks in, and transitions coveting into covenanting.

From COVET to COVENANT

Are you looking for a ransom? It's not like we have an option *not* to pay. Even so, I suspect that you - or one of your kin - will come again. And if we can imagine that future encounter, without succumbing to flights of fancy, we learn how to think and emote with corporeal and communal forms of improvisational solidarity glued together by our treasured remembrances. Those repurposed memories of other places and times are the coin-of-the-realm by which we build multiple forms of presence - sight and sound and prayer and ultimately even touch - that approximate the corporeal forms that have nourished us, and open up vectors for new rituals of gathering. We transition from coveting to covenanting.

The great religions of the world have given *us* many gifts, one of which is to ability to engage the (costly) failure of imagination not with forms of social Darwinism of the survival of the religiously, politically, economically and technologically fittest, but with corporeal and communal forms of improvisational solidarity. Many African philosophers, religious leaders, and epistemologists call this *Ubuntu*, the notion that the individual is always already the product of the communal, and that that relation is not only bilateral and multilateral; it sustains itself by its ability to be multiple, to be generous and therefore renewable. The ancient Hebrew poets called it *Hesed* - steadfast love - and described its character as being renewable everyday so that it produces not just a single great all-embracing faithfulness but *many* daily faithfulnesses (Lam. 3:22-23). The gift is the multiplicity that allows - that compels - us to stand with our differently abled local and global bodies, as they struggle to endure the latest manifestation of erasure, enormous loss and alienation. We have learned some covenanting skills.

Some of our communities have given more than others to your high and costly demands. We have already paid heavily for - what? Species survival. What does it mean to inhabit, to somehow survive, and ultimately to demand release from the spaces and places of disposable

life, and more importantly from the ideology and mechanisms of disposability? Does one “rise” in the form of dust, rise from the dusty wreckage, as *the caged bird sings*?

Your pervasiveness, COVID, forces us to ask how we can hold all of life together - including the life you have relocated to *Sheol*, to the Deep. We are told to wash our hands routinely, to keep ourselves from being infected, and in turn infecting others, and worse, being relocated to *Sheol*. This ritual act of life is healthy only if the water is clean. We have lived with and struggled against water pollution for long - with Flint Michigan as one of many such realities around the world. We have also lived with, and struggled to deal with other forms of water pollution - water polluted by the transatlantic slave trade and genocide, as well as in modern genocides such as Rwanda, where the water became the coroner and custodian of dead bodies. Like Jonah, I have a nagging suspicion of such waters because there’s something fishy about them; they have been made to swallow up bodies and then spit them out on the shores of imperial cities that seem capable of momentary repentance only when threatened with extinction. And so, we connect the physical waves to another form of wave, the epistemological wave. We may or may not swim again in the oceans, but we can produce artistic and ritual activities that simulate our experiences of erasure and alienation, and transition out into openings for new beginnings. We may yet stand beside John the Baptizer, stand between the wilderness and the water, to ensure that weary pilgrims are refreshed and sinking bodies rise from deep seas. This is the work of trauma-hope; the weaving of the fragments of history into new futures.

Are closures what you demand? So we shut down, shelter in, stay home, stop shaking hands and say we are strong and in this together. You slow but don’t cease. We wash down and mask up. Sure you wane but continue to wonder to and fro like a thief and where you’ll strike nobody knows. Is it a question of prediction or about divining the future? Prediction juices the sensory organs for an unfolding present-future yet undetermined. But the alerted senses must then do the work of preparation and resilience production. That is how African Americans have developed and used “The Talk” to prepare young men when they go into public spaces. The child who has received that “Talk” from a parent, a mentor, a priest, scholar, counselor, sangoma, or ancestor (living-dead, to quote the late John Mbiti) goes into the public knowing that they are not alone. Their resilience and ultimate survival of the dangerous public space is a function of the fact that they become a multitude, a legion, when they reengage the public space. The ritual character of that “Talk” does more than transfer information from mentor or parent to child; it also shares epistemology and tactic and strategy and even presence. The Talk, the Prayer, the Kiss on the forehead - these become communal shawls that connect the child to their larger family.

A model of The Talk is found in sacred scripture:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6)

And it is this truth claim that underlies the African COVENANTING saying: “If you want to go fast, you go alone; if you want to go far, you go together.” We must go together, for we are Many!

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/04/positively-outraged-with-covid-an-open-letter-to-the-coronavirus/>