

EXPLORATIONS



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The Time Given Us

Joe Gill
Severna Park, MD

I have been thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it squares with our faith, and what it means for the time to come.

Over the past two millennia, there have been twenty (20) pandemics, including the Plague of Justinian (dating 541-542, with 30-50 million dead), the Black Death (dating 1347-1351, with 200 million dead), and the Spanish Flu (dating 1918-1919, with 40-50 million dead). Pain, suffering and yes, even pandemics are part of the fabric of earthly existence, as are joy, and peace, and love. Realizing this, I recall the second part of the full version of the Serenity Prayer. It implores us to accept hardship as the pathway to peace, to take the world as it is, not as we would have it.

God, grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change...
Courage to change the things I can,
And Wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His will.
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

The time ahead is not about “getting through” the next month or two, or the next year. It is about *living* through, living in this time, as fully and humanly as our capacities and gifts allow.

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo, referring to the dark forces of Sauron rising to overcome Middle-earth in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Loving Energy Fills the Air

**Suzanne Farnham
Founder**

It all began when I came across an NPR interview by radio host Krista Tippett. She was speaking with Marilyn Nelson, an English professor and poet, who mentioned a clergy friend of hers who had attended a spiritual retreat. Following times of group dialogue, participants would go to their rooms to pray in solitude. At one point when this minister was in his room robustly talking to God, out of nowhere he heard a voice say, “Shut up and let me love you.” These startling words pierced my soul and have led me to a new place.

I truly believe that God loves every human being at every moment. For years I have known that, to the extent that I can be still within, I will be gifted with a sense of God’s abiding presence. But the sharpness of the command to “Shut up and let me love you” jolted me, then slowly led me to a fuller realization of how the divine love, transmitted through God incarnate in people we encounter in daily life, is there to be received by us. We need only make the effort to pause and reverence it.

Often, I observe expressions of tender love between a parent and child or profound affection between spouses. I hear reports of selfless acts of heroism or remarkable acts of forgiving. In addition, gestures of kindness extended to me by strangers kindle gratitude in my heart. However, it is only recently that I try to STOP when I witness or experience God (Love) so alive in ordinary people. Now, when I notice God’s love flowing generously through regular people, I try to pause and find the still place deep within—and then to connect with the loving energy that fills the air and to linger in it. This endeavor constitutes an additional way to receive God’s love. It can be reduced to four steps. Whenever you encounter incidents of love emanating from people:

Pause.
Tap into the surge of loving energy.
Absorb it.
Honor it with a thankful heart.

These steps are simple. They are interior and silent. Whenever I follow them, I can feel God’s love envelop me. The challenge for me is to be alert enough to seize the moment—to practice doing this until it becomes a conditioned reflex. The main thing is to REMEMBER TO PAUSE right away. Then enter into the sacred moment.

Despite the uneven quality of how I go about this, the effort has added a new dimension to my life in God. Loving energy fills the air, day in and day out. It is there for us to notice and then immerse ourselves in!

A Call to Redemption

**Joe Gill
Severna Park, MD**

It is hard these days to read the newspapers or watch the news or even, at times, to be in the world. Perhaps it has always been so, and it just seems much harder now. Climate change and natural disasters. The noise of politics and the politics of noise. A desire for leadership not fulfilled. And now, a pandemic. These times are enough to cause, in the words of Annie Dillard, “reality fatigue.” How are we to understand the world, and what are we to do about it?

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Isaac Luria, a rabbi in the sixteenth century, asked these questions also, and he fashioned his own answer—in a story of creation. The story has been handed down for generations to explain a time when it seemed as though God had left the world. Luria conjectured that, in order to create the world, God contracted into Godself. This withdrawal created a space into which God began to form vessels to hold the divine light. This light was meant to radiate out, fill the world, illuminate everything around us, and finally pour into the creation of man. But as God poured the light into the vessels, the light was so powerful that the vessels could not contain it. They shattered, and sparks of this divine light became embedded in the world of matter. God's presence became hidden and was unable to shine forth.

Now, Luria was an ascetic who fasted and prayed and often walked alone. He had fashioned a story of creation to make sense of the world as he saw it, and though his life was one of fasting and prayer, he felt that his God was in exile, and he was often in despair.

Two centuries passed. In the middle of the eighteenth century, a man named Israel ben Eliezer left his home in the mountains and, with his wife, moved to the city of Miedzyboz, a center of Jewish learning in the Ukraine. There he began teaching, though he had no formal training. Years later, people would name him Baal Shem Tov, meaning the master of the good name. Baal Shem Tov did not despair because the divine sparks were embedded in the matter of the world. He rejoiced in them as “God within.” He preached that through a life of prayer, holiness, and service, the divine sparks would be freed, releasing God—releasing the divine presence—into the world. According to Baal Shem Tov, “He who prays and sings in holiness, eats and speaks in holiness, in holiness performs the appointed ablutions, and in holiness reflects upon his business, through him the sparks which have fallen will be uplifted, and the worlds which have fallen will be delivered and renewed.”

Baal Shem Tov danced while he prayed, his feet as light as a four-year old's. He is reported to have turned cartwheels. He kept no money in his house overnight; if any money came to him, he paid his debts and gave away the rest. Aging did not stop him; as he grew older, he used crutches, dragging his left foot, but smoked his pipe and taught until his death. He taught “joy in performing the commandments.” His life was a celebration with the heart, a celebration of service. Said Baal Shem Tov, “It is given to men to lift up the fallen and to free the imprisoned. Not merely to wait, not merely to look on! Man is able to work for the redemption of the world.”

We are here to lift up the fallen, to free the imprisoned. We are here to serve. To serve is to notice, to see, and to act, in holiness, in prayer, and in service, right here, right now, in our own lives. From Dillard again: “God entrusts and allots to everyone an area to redeem: this creased and feeble life, ‘the world in which you live, just as it is and not otherwise.’ . . . Here and now . . . an ordinary person would approach with a holy and compassionate intention the bank and post office, the carpool, the God-help-us television.” Here and now. More than ever, this world needs people who bring a holy and compassionate intention to every part of their lives all day, all life long. The appropriate response to reality fatigue is not despair. The response is *redemption*: to free the sparks of the divine in daily acts of service.

Joe Gill, a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, is a co-author of Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community and a leader of the Day of Discernment program.

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people the practice of spiritual
discernment through prayerful listening
in supportive communities.

*Love is our true destiny. We do not find
the meaning of life by ourselves alone –
we find it with another.*

– Thomas Merton, Love and Living

All Will Be Well

**Wendy Gayle
Fredericksburg, VA**

Peace.
A sign
of comfort
from the Spirit.
A chance to exhale.
I sometimes hold my breath
during tumultuous times.
But when I close my eyes and breathe,
resting in the peace of the Spirit,
I know all will be well, all will be well.

*This poem was first published on Miss Gayle's blog, <https://www.windowstothspirit.com/> on
April 19, 2019.*

Wendy Gayle is a newly-trained Senior Program Associate for Listening Hearts Ministries, a mentor in the Education for Ministry four-year study course, and a discernment facilitator for the Diocese of Virginia. Writing poetry for her is a method of spiritual meditation and a way of showing intention. The blog is called Windows to the Spirit because through the words, windows have opened and insights gained into her life's spiritual journey.