

Corona Chronicle, Week Two

Cantor Shoshana Brown

Thursday, March 26

We are nearing the end of what I am thinking of as the second week of this “corona crisis” period – at least it is the second week of all Massachusetts schools being closed. To pinpoint exactly when this crisis started seems an impossible task, since even though the first case in the U.S. was confirmed in Washington State on Jan. 21st, it appeared that the person who was carrying the virus must have been infected by someone else also in the U.S. Since then, it has become apparent that so many people who carry the virus are asymptomatic; hence we really do not know when this all started.

Nor do we know when it is going to end. This morning I read in the *New York Times* about families who cannot now hold proper funerals, memorials, or follow other conventional mourning rituals following the death of their loved ones. It is quite distressing, and it brings into focus how important our traditional rituals are. Over the millennia we humans have collaboratively honed (via the “collective unconscious”) what is healthy for our souls, and what we need to do to move successfully through the “stages of grief” after the loss of a loved one. Like all our other plans these days, the soul’s progress through this “valley of the shadow of death” has to be somewhat put on hold until we can once again gather together, embrace one another, sit down to a meal with anyone other than the members of one’s immediate household.

Thankfully, Rabbi Mark and I have not been called upon to attend to any such situations since this all began – may we all stay alive and well! In our efforts to keep in touch with our TBE members during this period when the temple’s doors are closed, we have slowly been making phone calls to as many members as we can. I say “slowly,” because a real conversation takes time. I have been quite touched by these conversations –by how warm and appreciative people are. Some say “you made my day,” but it is just as true that they made *our* day. And yet these conversations are like chocolate: you can only eat so many pieces at a time. So please know that if we haven’t gotten to you yet, we will – unless this crisis ends much sooner than anyone thinks possible.

Strangely enough, between making phone calls and writing weekly installments of this “chronicle,” finishing up writing for the April TBE bulletin, and also a column this week for the *Fall River Herald News*, plus overseeing (with an extremely light hand) Lev’s keeping up with his school work, and making sure that we all get exercise every day, I feel busier than ever! I had my first experiences of “Zoom” yoga classes recently, as well as a Zoom-meeting with over 40 representatives of various social agencies in the greater Fall River area (convened by Wendy Garf-Lipp of United Neighbors) to coordinate ways of helping individuals and families who are in great distress during this crisis.

It would be easy to sit glued to a cable news station all day, watching as the numbers of confirmed cases, and of deaths, rise around the country, and as one pundit after another spouts forth their critique on what our government is doing about it. But, as Shakespeare had his poor

old King Lear say, “that way madness lies.” Yesterday Lev and I got into the car to drive to a local nature reserve for a walk, and when I started the car, the radio came on with more news of Covid-19. “You know what?” I said to Lev – “Let’s listen to a CD instead.” The disk that I already had in my car’s CD player was the original Broadway recording of *West Side Story*.

At first I fast-forwarded the disk to the track that had a song Lev had enjoyed when he was young, “Officer Krupke.” We had probably not listened to this recording together for years. He still enjoyed the song, so muscular in its rhythms, and so comical in its lyrics. But now that he is seventeen, I wanted to put the song in context for him. So we talked about the story, and then went back and listened to the recording from the beginning. I told him how absolutely revolutionary Bernstein’s musical was when it first came out – there had never been anything like it in American music, and how, when the curtain came down at the end of the first performance there was at first dead silence, and Bernstein thought “Oh, they didn’t get it; they hated it.” But then after the audience caught its breath, they rose as one to their feet and cheered and cheered. I get tears in my eyes when I think of that story, as I do when I listen to this music even now – it was so fantastically groundbreaking, so vibrant, so deep, so moving, and Sondheim’s lyrics just brilliant. After our walk, we continued to listen to this recording of *West Side Story* in the kitchen as Lev had his dinner, and I showed him how certain musical themes were introduced in a peaceful setting, and then re-used in a setting interlaced with conflict and the sounds of gangs fighting. Bernstein brilliantly conveys to us in the music how complicated life can be – how life can be magical and brutal at the same time.

Of course it is important to keep abreast of the news to some extent – and to obey all recommendations of caution to preserve the health, and the lives, of both others and ourselves. But if we can take some of this unexpected time of being cooped-up and having our schedules curtailed to indulge in some of the deep richness of life – whether it be by reading a great novel, or listening to great music, doing some adventurous cooking or baking, learning how to meditate (on Zoom!), watching a classic film, or maybe writing or painting, or whatever is particularly meaningful to you – we can stay in touch with what is so great about being alive to begin with.

And of course, it is a great idea to pick up the phone and call a friend, a brother or sister, perhaps someone you have thought about but haven’t spoken with for a long time – you were too busy. Well, you finally have time – and what’s more, most everyone is at home!

It is a time of taking-stock. A time of feeling grateful for things that we usually take for granted. An early part of Jewish morning prayer, called *birkhot ha-shachar*, is a list of blessings (you might call them “appreciative statements”) about our physical existence. We begin by thanking God for restoring consciousness to our waking minds each morning. After using the bathroom for the first time in the morning, we thank God that all our body’s “plumbing” is working. And then we thank God that we have the ability to discern between day and night; we thank God for once again having our eyesight in the morning, for being able to stand up straight, for having clothes to put on, for being able to walk and move about, for having our material needs met, and for being given the strength to take on another day. Sometimes when I say my daily prayers at home I skip these blessings, but lately I have felt how important they are, and make sure to

include them. If there is one thing that we should learn during this “corona crisis” (in addition to the importance of washing our hands!) it is this: *take nothing for granted*.

Once again, I wish for you all good health and bright spirits, and wish you a Shabbat Shalom – and I leave you with this picture of some daffodils I met on one of my walks (along Seapowet Road in Tiverton) – may they be harbingers of a brighter time to come, Cantor Shoshana

