Thursday Lent week Five

Not so long-ago experts and specialists were out of fashion. They were rejected as part of the ‘establishment’ and replaced by ‘the people’, the ordinary people who wanted their views heard. Now in a full-blown global health crisis that is changing the world as neither the establishment nor the people could have done, experts have become the ones we trust. We trust them because, unlike those leaders who are preaching denial and false hope, these medical experts, statisticians and epidemiologists, admit to a large mix of uncertainty in their opinions. They don’t claim to have all the answers and generally they recognise this is not the time to point the finger of blame.

Living with uncertainty is a right brain function. It is part of the contemplative path through life, including all life’s crises. In an un-contemplative lifestyle, where everything is done to excess and at unnecessary speed, we leap from one false certainty to another. The sudden slowdown and shutdown affects us all – from people working alone from their computers in the suburbs, to those who have lost their jobs and cannot afford to feed themselves or their families, to the millions of migrants workers in India forced at four hours’ notice to walk hundreds of kilometres to their home villages. Suffering and fear can isolate us, but they can also become a bridge when we see how we are feeling the same things as everyone else. The shock is to find how radical uncertainty is. So, how necessary it is that we know how to live with it wisely. The shock, too, is a suddenly altered sense of time.

One good source of wisdom is the 6th century monastic rule of life written by St Benedict that we adapt to our life here at Bonnevaux. Benedict knew about uncertainty: one community he founded tried to poison him, the great city of Rome (the Washington DC of its day) was invaded and sacked by barbarians and he lived with a group of people of greatly differing temperaments who could fly off in different directions any day – or several times a day. His main solution to uncertainty was to make a daily schedule and – with reasonable flexibility of course – stick to it.

Maybe that’s a first step for many people isolated at home with others or alone: make a realistic timetable including the things you need and want to do and post it on your fridge door. Look at it and see if it feels balanced. Does it represent ordinary common humanity – physical needs, mental needs and spiritual needs?

Adjusting it to reflect basic human needs is a first step to getting a handle on the feeling of fear and panic that uncertainty and slow-down. It is step to curing the virus of fear and panic. It helps us to see health differently even in the midst of a pandemic. When we have re-connected to the sense of the present we will find that peace – the peace we lost in all that stress – is closer to us, deeper within us, than we had ever imagined.

Friday Lent Week Five

Although the response to the [Contemplative Path](https://www.wccm.org/content/contemplative-path-through-crisis) programme has been keeping us online and in touch with the meditators around the world, we have been living a regular, quiet life here at Bonnevaux. But yesterday I disturbed the peace by setting off the fire alarm in the house trying to light a fire in the fireplace in my study because it suddenly got colder here. My failed attempt produced clouds of smoke that blew inwards rather than up the chimney. I thought I had learned by now how to start a fire with wood in a small fireplace. But once again I discovered again how little I know and how easy it is to repeat mistakes.

Of course, to light a fire you start with paper. How much to lay down is always a difficult decision to make. Then you add kindling, small pieces of wood or cardboard. You can’t be sure the wood is dry enough and sometimes it rejects your advances to ignite it. The firelighters I then add are annoyingly temperamental and usually go out as soon as you place anything on top of them. Or. they fall between the wood and the paper and I attempt to save the fire by lighting the paper. This produces an initial gratifying blaze and a flickering sense of achievement. I feel successful, or to be honest, just lucky. But it is a false hope.

Some of the small pieces of wood eventually catch fire half-heartedly. I hope this will spread to the larger pieces of wood that I have waiting nearby to add. As I am very impatient, I usually put the bigger logs on the new flames too quickly. I hope, I imagine, I pray they will catch the fire. But after a while everything dies down. I have made too much of a demand on the small flames and expected too much. Soon there are just a few burning embers left. At this point it’s easy to despair. It’s not a big issue in life, lighting a fire, but the smallest disappointment can trigger darker moments of despair. Just misplacing your car keys can trigger a series of previous more painful losses in your life. Why not just switch on the electric fire?

But my Irish determination fights against despair. I run outside to pick up a new supply of small pieces of wood. When I get back the embers are almost dead, but I carefully put the new kindling on top of them. I throw in one of the useless firelighters as well. What’s there to lose? Lying on the floor I blow long and hard into the glowing embers and eventually a few glorious flames appear. Encouraging but not to be trusted.

An hour or so later, after frequent interventions and near-death experiences, the fire is burning merrily. The secret of course is not what you put on top but what lies underneath. When the foundation of the fire is hot and glowing, anything you add will be consumed. Fire like love consumes what it feeds on. There is a glorious union and then it’s over. The room is almost too warm and it’s time for bed.

I won’t bore you with an explanation of this poor parable. I think it’s obvious. For Lent. For a pandemic. For daily meditation.

Saturday Lent Week Five

In a crisis, feeling uncertain of how or if it will end, hearing myriad opinions and predictions from people who have just heard something they want you to believe, what is there to do except simply ‘do the next thing’?

Quite often we find the courage we did not know we had, simply by doing the next thing trustingly and without delay. The big enemy is always postponement driven by fear. Obey without delay, St Benedict says. In crisis times we hardly know what we are obeying. Yet often, not knowing what the next thing after the next thing will be, makes things turn out better than we could have hoped or imagined.

Crisis arrives in many ways. It can creep up on you slyly or suddenly hit you sideways and send you into spin on a slippery road. A real crisis though is always more than a temporary challenge or upset. It is there the next morning and the morning after that and for as far ahead as you can see. No amount of imagining or wishing will reverse what has happened. That is its stomach-turning finality, its unavoidability.

Despite this it, it keeps on taking new shapes, new fears, new questions about why and will there ever be an end to it Will you survive it? In a temporary upset this question can bring you to your senses: ‘well of course in time I will recover’, we say to ourselves. But in a real crisis you don’t know. You just know there is a real possibility you won’t survive. Maybe this is the last one. Hope depends on facing that possibility.

Increasingly, in a real deepening crisis, you realise there will never be a going back to the way things were and yet you are not sure if what lies ahead is a cliff-edge or a new world. Time will tell what kind of crisis this coronavirus has been. Many feel that life will never be the same, that the recovery will be hard and there may fundamental change for good or ill. Nor can we know if or for how long we will remember the lessons learned during the worst of it.

All of that is in the medium or long-term. What is facing us now is the next thing to do, in the shut-in, working from home or depending on others to keep us alive or provisioned. Will we go stir-crazy or will we gently, bravely dive into the present moment by doing the next thing with presence of mind? We have to hold on to mental balance while learning to let go of so many of the habits of mind that unbalanced us in the past. This is what I mean by finding a contemplative path through the crisis. It’s not about becoming suddenly religious or pious.

It means letting go of anxiety and fear and of our always trying to peer around the corner, predicting the future so that we can control it. Meditation is the way to train to do this. The fruits of meditation are many and quietly revolutionary. But don’t expect dramatic experiences or revelations. Wait till you see that you are doing the next thing with calm and clarity, despite feeling fear and anxiety. That shows you are on a contemplative path and that life has purpose and direction. Twice a day, meditation is the next thing.