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Learning in Wartime

I skipped class on Friday. It was March 13th, and the night before we—the students on campus at Taylor University—had received an announcement from our Provost that, in light of the rapid escalation of events surrounding COVID-19, face-to-face instruction would be suspended for some time following the conclusion of our newly extended Spring Break. Beyond this, the women's basketball team had their National Championship tournament swept out from beneath them; the baseball team—of which I'm a participant—and the rest of spring sports had their seasons suspended with the expectation of cancellation; and worship nights and prayer circles keep spontaneously erupting like ants under the magnifying glass; and I feel like an ant under a magnifying glass. It was March 13th and I was bidding farewell to people I would most likely never see again in this life.

So, I skipped class.

In the midst of all *this*, when the entire country of Italy is quarantined, when I have nightmares about un-flattened curves and 30% infection rates, when the entire professional sports and higher education worlds shut down, when I'm hugging my best friend at the conclusion of his baseball career in March, I just couldn't wrap my mind around sitting and listening to an hour-long lecture on Henry David Thoreau. When you actively—or even passively—pay attention to what experts are saying about this coronavirus, who cares about developmental psychology or analytical chemistry? When it feels like I am walking through an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, it is really hard to care about anything scholarly. Yet, is that not what we were called to do?

Lewis' address to the students at Oxford later recorded and printed as the essay, *Learning in Wartime*, focused not on the questions raised by some highly infectious virus but by the German assault on Europe in World War II. Yet, in some strange way, his audience was the same. College students wondering who they were to continue this thing called learning while the world fell apart around them. I imagine—in a much more serious manner—a feeling of Twilight Zone permeated the Cambridge campus in those days. Students drifted from lecture to lecture, their bodies taking them from place to place not able to wring in their mind and soul from the ever-reaching ethereal. It is always in the shadow of some unfathomable thing that we question our vocation. There are things in this world that seem to reach into the grand eternal, and it is in the shadow of these incomprehensibilities that we divorce ourselves from the present hoping perhaps that by gaining some distance from reality we might be able to find some perspective on the grand mystery at hand.

However, in severing our ties to the present moment, we sacrifice our ability to make any difference in the world. “The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received” (Lewis 61). It is a good and admirable thing to devote your study to history or philosophy or mathematics, and it is definitely impossible to totally ignore that thing—whether it be war or pandemic—which seems to blot out the sun. But, to devote your present in its entirety to your study or to the pandemic “is rendering to Caesar that which, of all things, belongs most emphatically to God” (Lewis 53).

Granted, Lewis was speaking within the context of such a thing that brought about the question of life and death in each waking moment. What we are dealing with is indeed completely and utterly incomparable with World War II in all ways excepting the manner in which it affects the mind. The two—war and plague—seem to incite the same fear in very

different ways. (I use the word plague not in belief that this is indeed what we are dealing with, but rather in reference to the way in which we have responded.) The coronavirus is expected to sweep through the country in 6-12 weeks rather than the years of disastrous war experienced in Europe. Yet, in that relatively short amount of time, we expect to see hundreds of thousands die worldwide. I have even read a study that suggests the number of cases in America alone could reach into the tens of *millions*. The numbers are incomprehensible. As an individual and collective student body, we are caught in limbo between understanding how distant yet inexplicably near this pandemic seems to us. It is the same suspenseful fear of anticipation that coincides with stillness and quiet in any given horror film.

It is quite different from simply not knowing what might come next. That is indeed the constant and eternal human predicament. Yet, in that state of unknown, we make incredible use of the point of reference, so much so that we become lost without it. The ship's captain guides his vessel by reference to the North Star by night and the sun by day. The meteorologist analyzes current weather patterns to tell us whether we should remember to bring our raincoats with us as we leave for work the next day. We as a culture live in reference. And, just as the sailor is lost without the North Star to guide him, so we are lost without our own reference point. This is where our fear resides. We are treading water in depths unknown. There is no similar experience in the modern age that might be a suitable referent. And in this state, we become fearful for we don't know yet whether we are encountering a disease which may indeed earn its title as a plague or if this is yet something that will be remembered lightly in antiquity.

Yet, this fear is somehow both rational and irrational. As Lewis refers to the fear associated with war, so the same applies to that of COVID-19, the fear of death and suffering. However, war makes neither of these more frequent: everyone dies eventually and certainly

death seems to nearly always be preempted by some level of suffering (Lewis 61-62). This fear is rational in that it is rational to fear death and suffering in any capacity. It is irrational, however, to fear death and suffering in war and disease more than in any other context. For these contexts only serve to bring to light that which we may otherwise ignore. It is easy to be ignorant of the pain and suffering associated with death when that ever-present reality is always so distant. It is only when the prospect of death becomes imminently close that we come to terms with our true and terrible fear of such a thing.

And yet, we continue learning. In the midst of all *this*. My question is why?

Lewis says that our calling remains our calling whether the world is ending or not. Simply because these unimaginable circumstances come rushing forward, dragging death along behind them like some horrible, twisted parade doesn't mean that anything about our current situation changes. We will someday die, and I am certain that it will not be pleasant. We live along the ever-constant fringe of eternity. It just usually takes some massive event to get us to actually look down and recognize that condition in which we always find ourselves. So, if our calling is to be a scholar, then our calling is to be a scholar. We are called to this present moment. The idea of vocation is not some destination, rather it is a condition in which we live. It is not some arbitrary "X" on a treasure map where God lays out the steps along the way to get there. Our calling is now, and it always has been, regardless of what may come.

Yes, I skipped class on Friday, and Lewis probably would not have recommended such a strategy to deal with what mayhem is going on. But, Monday is a new day. And today, I am a scholar.