

Cultivating Awareness as We Come Back Together

Laura Funk

We are emerging from a major global event. What a range of thoughts and feelings we are all going through! As we reconnect in person, cultivate awareness in several areas:

PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES

Some people are huggers, while others might be reticent to touch (especially after this year!). Some are introverts and need time to process, while others are bursting at the seams for big parties.

- Always ask for and wait to receive consent before initiating physical touch.
- Be gentle. Remember that the trauma of the pandemic affected us all in different ways. Healing will take time and will look different for each of us.
- Let the other person lead. Look for clues that can help you pick up on what a person needs to talk about and what the person really doesn't want to talk about.
- Ask invitational questions like "How can I connect with you and support you as you go through this?" Then follow through! Imitate Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35): ask simple, gentle questions ("What things?") and listen as people talk.

RELATIONAL CIRCUITS

God created humans as relational beings. God also wired us for survival. When we feel threatened or overwhelmed, we can switch from relational mode to survival mode. Think of a person who is drowning—because a drowning person might use a rescuer as a flotation device, lifeguards never swim out to a drowning person without also bringing a flotation device.

- Make sure you are not in survival mode when you approach someone to offer care. Ask yourself, "Do I see this person as a child of God or as a resource to be used?" If you struggle to see the person as a child of God, one way to reorient your circuits is to focus on gratitude. What can you be grateful for?
- Cultivate personal relationships outside your work environment where you can find emotional support. Do not lean on the people you care for in order to meet your own relational needs.
- If you feel as if you are drowning, take a break! Call a friend or mentor. Take some time to pray.

THEOLOGY

How do your beliefs about death/mental health/divorce/God affect how you interact with others? Examine your own fears and beliefs before teaching them to others. What do you believe about God's role in this pandemic? Did God send this to punish an errant humanity, or does God walk alongside us in the mystery of pain and suffering?

- Take some time to journal and reflect on what you believe. How do those beliefs line up with the loving character of Jesus found in Scripture?
- How will those beliefs help your community heal from the pain and anxiety of this past season?
- Connect with other spiritual leaders to talk about how each of you views God's role in the pandemic. Listen with love. Learn together.

SPIRITUALITY

Jesus sometimes withdrew to pray alone (John 6:15). At other times, he drew his inner circle in close (Mark 9:2).

- Spend some time reflecting, either with others or in your journal, about how you feel about this pandemic and all that it has brought up for you.

- What do you need in order to walk toward deeper wholeness? Consider spending time talking with a counselor, a spiritual director, or a wise friend.
- Cultivate spiritual practices that feed your spirit so that you have something to give others.

COMMUNITY GRIEF

People need places and rituals for lament, to acknowledge the loved ones, opportunities, and milestones lost. Grief may be complex, and may include a range of emotions: relief, guilt, shame, gratitude, anger, joy, remorse, pain, bewilderment. Welcome them all. All emotions are gifts from God. Remind people that Jesus experienced them all, too.

- Provide rituals/services/symbolic actions to help people process the losses. Invite people to bring symbols of their losses. Display them with compassion.
- Invite people to write down losses and offer them to God in a ritual involving fire, water, or both.
- Have a box of tissues handy. They communicate, “Your tears are welcome here.”
- Meditate on verses in Scripture that demonstrate the range of human emotions we can see in Jesus and express in prayer, such as Matthew 21:12-17; John 11:35; Luke 19:41; Ephesians 4:26; Psalms 27, 56, 62, 147.

JUSTICE ISSUES

Tough issues we face as a society—such as racism, sexism, and classism—were very present in the public sphere over the last year and a half.

- Pay attention to those in your congregation who are experiencing the impact of these issues.
- Inform yourself and offer support where you can. Don't expect the people who are suffering to inform you.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Miriam Greenspan, *Healing through the Dark Emotions* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Press, 2004).

This book leads you through important recognition of and resources for working with complex emotions. Greenspan's website (<https://MiriamGreenspan.com>) is full of good resources for emotional healing.

Dr. Karl Lehman (<https://KCLehman.com>)

Lehman is a Christian, psychiatrist, and leader in the field of faith-based emotional healing. He and his wife Charlotte Lehman, MDiv, along with others, created a website provide helpful resources for Christians working in the area of emotional healing and for those to whom they minister.

Guided Meditation for the Pandemic (<https://ButterflyJourneys.ca/data/documents/GM-pandemic-2.m4a>).

A free guided meditation focused on healing from the stress and other effects of the pandemic.

Tilda Norberg, *Consenting to Grace* (New York: Penn House Press, 2006); *Gathered Together* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2015).

Excellent resources for those wishing to create new perspectives that involve holistic approaches to liturgy.



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