

Mercy Global Action: Presence to Self & Others

Siobhán Golden (MIA): ‘Cultivating a sense of belonging amid pandemic’

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our lives, causing many to feel isolation, disappointment, and grief. On a global basis, systemic inequalities have been highlighted and immense loss, suffering and distress continues to be experienced. It has had a dreadful impact on human rights, bringing to the forefront both the fragility and oneness of humanity and Earth.

For each of us, the emotional experience of the pandemic is highly individual. It is connecting us to our deepest values, our sense of self and our sense of belonging. To heal from this crisis and create an inclusive culture, we must show up each day with Presence. A Presence that calls us to have patience, empathy and compassion for ourselves and others. A Presence that invites us to feel an inevitable gratitude and hope for life and the living.

As human beings, we crave security, stability and peace of mind, the very traits that are threatened by COVID-19 and its fog of uncertainty. This fog presents us with the chance to discover growth and test our human resilience in the face of hardship. There is a renewed willingness to be present, to witness and accept the raw emotions of joy and grief, and to allow ourselves the patience to focus on the sacred within.

We have experienced varying degrees of loss, grief and disruption which affects our physical and mental well-being. The mental toll, compounded by the lack of social connections, challenges our need to belong, both spiritually and emotionally. The poet, Jessica Powers, describes this personal struggle for belonging as *“the homelessness of the soul in the body sown; of seeing oneself a leaf, inexplicable and unknown, cast from an unimaginable tree”*.¹

Cultivating emotional and spiritual belonging can be strenuous and often requires leaning into our suffering and accepting our human limitations in order to embrace the fullness of who we are. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs argues that without a sense of belonging, we cannot feel valued, nor do we have the self-esteem that is necessary to set goals and achieve our potential.² During this incredibly stressful time, we must remember to be gentle with our hearts and dedicate our energy to what we are grateful for and have accomplished. By acknowledging our endurance and courage to show up every day and maintain resilience in the face of adversity, we can find the strength to emerge more resilient, more faithful and more loving.

¹ Powers, J. “There is a homelessness”, My Carmel, accessed November 26, 2020.

<https://mycarmel.blog/tag/jessica-powers-poetry/>

² Whybrow, N. “A sense of belonging: Do children still feel part of their school community if it is closed?”. Medium. July 24, 2020 <https://medium.com/ungei-blog/a-sense-of-belonging-do-children-still-feel-part-of-their-school-community-if-it-is-closed-2369c3308476>

In her book *Day by Day*, religious sister of Charity, Sister Stan Kennedy writes that you must be *“at peace with yourself, so that you can be a peaceful presence to others. Peace comes from the heart and is nourished by the vision that all life is sacred and that every human on the earth is equal”*.³

During this time of physically distancing and staying apart, it is more important than ever that we champion a culture of belonging by valuing one another and creating an atmosphere of love, kindness and acceptance.

Developing the habit of being truly open to the experience of another, demands empathy and compassion, the very attributes that enabled Catherine McAuley to assist and empower so many. *“Empathy is the ability to tolerate the tension of being truly open to the experience of another, the ability to attempt actively to understand the subjective world of the other and at the same time to remain a differentiated person”*.⁴ To relieve feelings of isolation and suffering, an empathetic presence is required in each of us that can foster a sense of belonging in another. It is the spirit of Catherine McAuley that can draw us out of our self-focus to prioritise the mutual well-being of humanity.

The current homelessness crisis must also be understood as a crisis of belonging. Approximately 1.8 billion people do not live in adequate housing worldwide.⁵ The civil society organisation [Back on My Feet](#) states that one of the reasons for the growing number of people living without a home is the lack of initiatives that are attentive to dignity and social inclusion.⁶ When people lose their physical homes, they also lose their sense of belonging. A truly holistic and humane approach to ending homelessness must enhance the functions of community so that everyone, including those most marginalised, feels that their participation and presence is valued.

The pandemic can be the very turning point that puts an end to the unconscious complicity that drives marginalisation, inequality and violations of dignity. Although it has caused devastating tragedies around the world, there have been countless heart-warming stories of people coming together and supporting each other, as a mutual consciousness awakens. We have seen a renewed care for humanity in how we have kept our distance to protect human health and in the mobilising of communities to help those marginalised and lonely.

Each act of kindness, whether big or small, is a step towards saving humanity. Mercy International Association’s recent publication, [‘Hope in a Time of Pandemic – Responding to COVID-19 through a Mercy Lens’](#), highlights the stories of presence and cooperation throughout the Mercy World during the COVID-19 crisis. A Mercy Sister wrote,

³ Kennedy, S. 2013. “Day by Day – A treasury of meditations on mindfulness to comfort and inspire”. Dublin, Ireland: Transworld Ireland.

⁴ Musgrave, B. 2003. “Empathy: The caregiver looks both ways” in *Partners in healing: Bringing compassion to people with illness or loss: A handbook*. ed. Musgrave, B. and Bickle, J. Mahwah: Paulist Press. (31-34.)

⁵ OHCHR. 2020. “Global housing crisis results in mass human rights violations – UN expert”. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25662&LangID=E>

⁶ Social Protection-Human Rights. 2017. “Dignity and Social Inclusion: Civil society’s role in social protection for homeless”. <https://socialprotection-humanrights.org/expertcom/dignity-social-inclusion-civil-societys-role-social-protection-homeless/>

“To be a Sister of Mercy in these times is being present with the people on the deserted streets, even if you have no words, but they know you are there, and that is what we have shared in this quarantine”.⁷

Sometimes our presence alone is enough to bring peace and well-being to another. Through bottom-up reflection we can see that it is the leadership, resilience and presence of people on the ground that brings hope and encourages cooperation over division. In Ireland, we refer to this resurgence of communal energy as the spirit of *Meitheal*.

Meitheal is the Irish expression of the ancient and universal appliance of cooperation to social need.⁸ Chair of the Elders and former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, has stated that the outpouring of care, the intergenerational solidarity and the sense of collective purpose learned throughout the pandemic, teach us the true meaning and spirit of *Meitheal*.⁹ Its spirit can unite us in our inherent dignity, promote equality and restore a sense of belonging in all of us.

Through advocating for the innate dignity of every person, fostering unity of mind and heart, and challenging oppressive systems of exclusion, inequality, and power, Mercy Global Action maintains solidarity with all of humanity at the global level. We continue our call for the presence of just and merciful leadership, whether local or global, to recognize the needs of the most vulnerable, amplify their voices and through cooperation, build a more peaceful, inclusive and sustainable world.¹⁰

We are all the peacemakers in a world crumbling with crises. Peace comes from reaching within and rekindling our hearts so we can spread love, compassion and kindness and in turn, cultivate a culture of belonging for all.

Our Presence is our Hope.

⁷ Mercy International Association - Global Action. Hope in a Time of Pandemic: Responding to COVID-19 Through a Mercy Lens” August 18, 2020. <https://www.mercyworld.org/f/45074/x/e3711034bd/f-covid-guide-web.pdf>

⁸ Meitheal. The Mary Robinson Centre. Retrieved from: <http://www.maryrobinsoncentre.ie/meitheal.html>

⁹ Echo Live. “We must build back, better” – Mary Robinson tells Teaching Council”. October 3, 2020. <https://www.echolive.ie/nationalnews/We-must-build-back-better-Mary-Robinson-tells-Teaching-Council-24e69455-00ea-45f1-b17c-82ba6e030f17-ds>

¹⁰ Mercy International Association - Global Action. Hope in a Time of Pandemic: Responding to COVID-19 Through a Mercy Lens” August 18, 2020. <https://www.mercyworld.org/f/45074/x/e3711034bd/f-covid-guide-web.pdf>