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To the many who have cared,

We presume that we would be ready for battle if confronted with a great crisis, but it is not the crisis that builds something within us – it simply reveals what we are made of already ... If you do not do the task that is closest to you now, which God has engineered in your life, when the crisis comes, instead of being fit for battle, you will be unprepared. A crisis always reveals a person's true character. (Chambers, Oswald. My Utmost for His Highest)

As I undertake the writing of this letter, I do so from my apartment in Guatemala City, having yet to return to my native New England since *coronavirus* became a household word. Guatemala is two days shy of completing six months living with COVID-19. Although president Alejandro Giammattei began to gradually lift restrictions several weeks ago, in an attempt to revive a hobbled economy, life has primarily remained unchanged. Voluntary quarantine is still encouraged. A familiar but distinctly unsettling quiet continues to be found, especially after dusk, when a 9 PM to 4 AM curfew is imposed. Streets in our neighborhood remain largely empty, with residents opting to stay at home behind closed doors, venturing out only when necessary. Taking precaution is still the norm.

With six months' time, even a drastically altered routine becomes the new routine, be it an unwelcome one. Humanity adapts out of necessity, if begrudgingly at first, and in disbelief perhaps, when a COVID-19 type scenario abruptly demands that our former ways of living be put on hold.

At some point, however, the majority of us come to understand that some elements of a new way of life can work to our advantage and, with time, come to appreciate them. Ready at a moment's notice to champion the benefits of tradition, I am, by nature, reluctant to embrace the unknown. But when in mid-March life demanded that I reconsider my relationship with it, I quickly saw the wisdom in working with the new world order rather than resisting it. Resistance, it seemed, would only serve to make a demanding if not unforgiving situation that much more insufferable. Change, when driven by necessity, not only mothers' invention, but also promotes progress.

I suspected quarantine was imminent. In the days leading up to it being made official on March 17, I went in search of what I perceived to be the essentials, those items needed to see us through 21 days of lockdown, be it government ordained or merely prudent. The list included: extended shelf life groceries, basic medical supplies, especially those related to throat and lung related problems, disinfectant, sanitizers, anti-bacterial soap and paper products, including the much-discussed toilet tissue. Aware of the acute shortages of such tissue then facing the U.S., I tried to be responsible and limit my purchase of the precious commodity to what I perceived would be a two-week supply.

Early morning, on the first day of quarantine, I moved into our shelter to cover for our live-in couple, Sandra and Rigoberto. Not 30 minutes after my arrival, they departed from our home and joined their children to ride out, what the president had declared to be a state of calamity.

Despite having previously taken up residence in our home to sub for house parents during holidays and vacations, settling in proved to be no easy matter. My modest supply of patience was often depleted by an unforeseen way of life, constantly reinventing itself in response to a barrage of government authorized decisions and decrees, issued with such frequency as to all but appear contradictory. Keeping up with the revisions seemed a head spinning proposition at first, leaving me at times to doubt my ability to manage the situation before me.

I realized it was time to step back to consider then make peace with the uncertainty of the times. Achieving the latter proved easier than I had imagined. It was simply a matter of responding to ever changing guidelines rather than reacting to them. Maintaining a sense of calm and composure in the midst of the chaos surrounding us depended on my willingness to remain flexible.

At first the days passed slowly, measured against a constantly evolving expectation of how long the quarantine would remain in place. In the beginning, two weeks was the general consensus, the estimate based not on available data, but rather, on the need to create a period of time which seemed manageable, if barely tolerable. The prospect of the indefinite loss of freedom and open-ended upheaval brought on by COVID-19, not only cast a shadow over the future, but also prompted widespread insecurity, the depth of which was new to many of us.

I decided we would carry on as best we could and, whenever possible, follow routines that had long shaped our program and grounded our lives. The goal was to maintain a sense of purpose, stability and continuity to counter the ever-shifting landscape outside our door. Our day commenced at a specific hour. The morning chores maintaining our house continued to be performed on a daily basis, with special emphasis given to adequately disinfecting our home. Meals were served at designated hours, with everyone expected to be seated at the table - on time.

We also adapted our routine in ways still available to us. The second-floor balcony fronting our home remained open from early morning till dusk, to provide the opportunity to step out risk-free, whenever needed. Walkers and joggers were allowed to continue to exercise, as long as they left at dawn and returned before 7 AM. Brief trips to the neighborhood store were permitted, assuming established guidelines were respected. And events were created to facilitate in-house gatherings, in an effort to offset the loss of social lives outside the home.

The importance of staying productive was stressed despite the fact the education's ever shifting new model required our residents to dedicate mornings, afternoons, and much of the night to classes and study related assignments. The demands of mastering a new technique constantly redefining itself left our students frustrated and exhausted. Still they carried on. I found myself equally occupied tending to the tasks usually managed by Sandra and Rigoberto while, at the same time, trying to remain current with my own responsibilities as Only A Child's Executive Director.

It was often a struggle. I wrestled with the inclination to feel I was just one step ahead of being overwhelmed. To overcome my tendency to worry, I limited my focus to the immediate tasks before me, and left pending concerns to the tomorrows of the future. I embraced *Alcoholic Anonymous'* philosophy to take 'one day at a time', and came to see its benefits in a whole new light. More importantly still, I listened to Christian themed radio stations when in the kitchen (much of the day) and found that the programming of Mass, informal sermons, Bible studies, rosaries, and hymns provided me with endless comfort and perspective.

Determined to keep self-pity at bay, I readily reminded my house mates that we were not alone in our struggles, that people around the world shared them also. The word solidarity often found its way into conversations held while gathered at the table and, through such conversations, maintained a sense of being connected to the world at large in ways that transcended physical proximity.

Eventually the days no longer seemed to pass so slowly and a COVID rhythm all its own took form and ultimately took hold. Time was measured in weeks, then weeks that seemed to fly by. Now, come mid-September, the months themselves seem to come and go with impossible speed. New routines have been established and become our new norm. God only knows how long they will remain so. Rigoberto and Sandra returned 10 days ago, after having been away far longer than I had imagined. They quickly settled in, without missing a beat. Returning to my apartment to live alone proved difficult after sharing a home with our shelter's residents for nearly half of a year. They were not only splendid company; they made my experience of the COVID reality far more enjoyable than I would have thought possible. I take consolation in knowing I will continue to see them on a daily basis.

I have regularly considered pre-Coronavirus times, of late. Based on my experience, it seems to me that humanity had lost control of the same life it had so meticulously tried to manage. In Guatemala City as in suburban Boston, life around me appeared to have taken the form of a frenzy of blurred activity for its own sake, often lacking in genuine purpose and resolution. I now see that I'd come to find this manner of living increasingly fruitless and disheartening.

I returned to my apartment physically exhausted, but emotionally and spiritually recharged. The COVID-19 way of life forced me to narrow my focus and reset priorities. Such adjustments have suited me well and I sense that my life going forward will be a more comfortable fit, regardless of what may lie ahead. I am, for the most part, oddly at peace. Armed with my faith, I await the future.

Funding this ministry has always presented specific challenges. Now, with no clear sense of what future struggles the world will face, economically or otherwise, those challenges will be compounded. Nevertheless, Only A Child goes forward, ready and willing to work with whatever obstacles we may encounter. Thank you for continuing to care about our mission at a time when you have so many worries of your own to manage.

May God bless.

George

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