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Mary (Joy) Philip

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Foreword and a few more words

Mary Philip aka Joy¹

Today is July 26, 2021! It is the 503rd day since WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and it has been 572 days since the first case of COVID-19 was reported Wuhan, China.² The title of this issue, “Living through COVID-19, Looking beyond COVID-19,” if I were to be honest, was a “Hail Mary” in more ways than one. Being the hopelessly hopeful person that I am, I thought I would be looking beyond COVID-19 by the time this issue was released. But here we are, still living through it. Just when we thought things were in control, out comes another variant! “How long” is a cry that has passed many a lip.

Going back to statistics, it has been 40 days since wild fires started in British Columbia that within three weeks wiped the town of Lytton; it has been 61 days since 215 unmarked and previously undocumented gravesites have been found at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School; it has been 51 days since four members of a Muslim family were run down while taking a walk, allegedly by a driver motivated by hate; it has been 462 days since George Floyd whispered “I can’t breathe” before being choked to death by the knee of Derek Chauvin.

I cannot help but think of the words in the book of Genesis that narrates the creation story where at the end of each day, it says: God saw that it was good. I am a firm believer of *creatio continua* and at the end of the day these days where there were/are many of acts of co-creation³ I am not sure I can wholeheartedly say “it was/is good!” There were indeed many good things, but can I really affirm the goodness of the day when the wildfires are still raging and the Indigenous communities are still grieving, when in one part of the world people are dying of drought, and in another they are being engulfed by water. And not forgetting the trail of tears that COVID-19 continues to leave behind.

However, it is also the 4th day since monarch butterflies started gracing our gardens, teasingly flitting by the cone flowers. The chirping of the yellow finches, the call of the loons, and cooing of the mourning doves are indeed soothing to weary nerves. Somewhere in this world of ours, at this very moment, an infant is taking its first breath and seeing the world for the first time outside of her mother’s womb; lovers are kissing each other; a mama elephant is suckling her baby.

Living through COVID-19 has been a testing time and yet a wellspring of opportunities. Wangari Maathai’s words that “there are opportunities even in the most difficult moments” could not be truer. The nine articles in this issue along with the sermons as well as the studies and observations talk about how we as teachers, administrators, ecclesiastical heads, political leaders and students have navigated this “corona time.”⁴

¹ Mary Philip (Joy) is editor in chief of Consensus; she is also associate professor of Lutheran Global theologies and Mission.

² WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 and the first case was reported on December 31, 2019.

³ I am referring to Philip Hefner’s term co-creators for human beings though I extend that term to all of the created ones not just human.

⁴ A term that Prof Ara Parker used during her lecture on June 24 at Martin Luther University College.

It is heartening to see how we as individuals, and communities are living through this time. Parr-Vasquez and Newman's article examines the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the research community at Laurier. They not only highlight how researchers were supported through the challenging time of the pandemic but also reflect upon the near-term future and longer-term prospects for the recovery of research at Laurier.

Warland talks about critical spatial shift that the pandemic has created. In an interesting exegesis of the Johannine texts and the Book of Revelation, Warland shows how these texts might relate to the global environmental crises and the pandemic prompting the reader to engage in eschatological imagination.

Bishop Coorilos dares us to raise questions about the relevance of contemporary institutional expressions of church and ecclesial life. The pandemic, he says, is challenging us to seek new ideals and new utopias. The Arabian fable that he cites is an apt narration of what the pandemic has bred – a climate of fear.

Ashoughian's article, "The Laurier Library on Demand" brought a smile to my lips as it was just a day ago that I watched a movie on "Video on Demand" or VOD. It reminded me of the many "on demands" that the pandemic has given rise to. She tells us how Laurier library not only rose to the demands of its patrons also performed critical social functions in support of their communities.

Joseph reminds us that "human beings are social creatures who thrive and make meaning together – in groups and in person." He does this adeptly through a poignant biographical sketch that reiterates that "individual and collective success lies in connection." Who but Joseph would compare student affairs to pastoral care! He also calls attention to the fundamental need of human beings to matter and belong.

In her article "The Accented word," Driedger Hesslein issues her readers an invitation and a challenge to listen. She points us to the fact that "we carry subconscious biases not just in the ways we see, but also in the ways we listen." It reminded me of the Brazilian bishop, Pedro Casaldáliga's words, "The universal Word speaks only dialect."⁵

Milloy, in his usual exuberance, puts two groups of people – the medical community and the politicians – one wearing scrubs and the other scrubbing away, side by side, acknowledging and applauding their support and service in these trying times. I wonder if he is saying this: Just as there is no perfect prescription, there are no perfect policies.

"Reflection of a New Dean" by Kristine Lund is an honest appraisal of her new position as the Principal Dean of Martin Luther University College. While acknowledging that assuming a new role in the midst of a pandemic is no walk in the park, she is quite aware that this is a walk pregnant with both perils and possibilities.

Sermons by Allen Jorgenson, Cláudio Carvalhaes and Janaki Bandara bring the gift of grace and proclamation. The issue features short papers from students at Martin Lutheran University College in studies and observations. Two of the four students engage in a documentary analysis, *The World at a Distance: Corona and the Year of Silence*, and the other two use art work (paintings) in theological reflection on the Earth Charter. The issue also has three book reviews that are timely.

For a good number of us living in the first world like Canada, COVID-19 has been more of an inconvenience than anything else. Yes, we missed physical contact and family dinners, and we had zoom fatigue. I am not diminishing that, but we also have to remember that for

⁵ Pedro Casaldáliga, *Creio na justiça e na esperança* (Civilização Brasileira, 1978), 211.

some others it has been extremely difficult having experienced sorrow due to the death of loved ones from COVID-19 or other causes. Many people have lost jobs while others, a good number of them from marginalized communities, had to work as frontline workers. Yet others worked under overwhelmingly stressful conditions. It is said that a record number of people have experienced mental health challenges.

We all have experiences and stories of what the pandemic has been, and continues to be, for us as individuals and communities, but let us also hope that the pandemic will not have the last word. While I dare to say that it will not have the last word, I will also say that we should not go back to how things were pre-COVID-19. We cannot!

Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.

These are the words of the activist, Sonya Renee Taylor and I could not but agree with her. The pandemic more than anything else had given us a much-needed pause, pause to take stock and do some hard thinking. Even after 503 days we are still trying to figure out things about this virus, the variants of which are still emerging. As Arundhati Roy says,

whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could . . . And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.⁶

So, this where I am now. I am a person of faith and I know I will lament for what has been and continues to be lost. Lament is the hope that not all is lost and that I can put it on God who is big enough to take it. It is not about God doing some hocus pocus or waving a magic wand and making all the problems go away but, in our lament, us finding a way out of no way, where how we respond to suffering changes and that changes us. I am seeing the pandemic as a portal. I am picturing it as a passage, a gateway that leads us to something new, and better. I am imagining and dreaming of another world, a better world, and most importantly, ready to fight for it. We owe it to the lives that were lost to this pandemic and to the future generations, our children and grandchildren.

As you get ready to read through the pages of this issue, I leave you with a poem, titled *Through a window* by Jane Goodall.

There are many windows through
which we can look out into the

⁶ Arundhati Roy, "Pandemic as a Portal," *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020.

world, searching for meaning ...
... Most of us, when we ponder on the
meaning of our existence,
peer through but one of these
windows onto the world.
And even that one is often misted over
by the breath of our finite humanity.
We clear a tiny peephole and stare through.
No wonder we are confused by the
tiny fraction of a whole that we see.
It is, after all, like trying to
comprehend the panorama of the
desert or the sea through
a rolled-up newspaper.⁷

We see only a tiny part of this messy and yet beautiful world, this magnificent home of ours, Earth. Maybe, this pandemic is both a reminder and wake up call that we are seeing only just a fraction of the whole picture, that we must be open to seeing those and that which we keep away from sight. It may make us uneasy and uncomfortable but unless we are open to our uneasiness, this disease will not leave us.

⁷ Jane Goodall, *Through a Window: My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe* (Mariner Books, New York, 2010).