Rolheiser: The dispelling of an illusion

We don’t much like the word disillusionment. Normally we think of it as a negative, something pejorative, and not as something that does us a favor. And yet disillusionment is a positive, it means the dispelling of an illusion and illusions, unless we need one as a temporary tonic, are not good for us. They keep us from the truth, from reality.

There are many, many negatives to the current coronavirus that’s wreaking a deadly havoc across the planet. But there’s one positive: Against every form of resistance we can muster, it’s dispelling the illusion that we are in control of our lives and that, by our own efforts, we can make ourselves invulnerable.

That lesson has come upon us uninvited. This unforeseen and unwelcome virus is teaching us that, no matter our sophistication, intelligence, wealth, health, or status, we’re all vulnerable, we’re all at the mercy of a thousand contingencies over which we have little control. No amount of denial will change that.

Granted, at one level of our consciousness we’re always aware of our vulnerability. But sometimes after we have walked a dangerous ledge for a long time we forget the peril and are no longer aware of the narrowness of the plank upon which we’re walking. Then too our sense of our vulnerability to a hundred million dangers is, like our sense of mortality, normally pretty abstract and not very real.

We all know that like everyone else we are going to die one day; but normally this doesn’t weigh very heavily on our consciousness. We live instead with the sense that we’re not going to die just yet. Our own deaths aren’t really real to us. They are not yet an imminent threat but only a distant, abstract reality.

Generally, such too is the vagueness of our sense of vulnerability. Yes, we know abstractly that we are vulnerable, but generally we feel pretty secure. But as this virus spreads, consumes our newscasts, and brings our normal lives to a halt, our sense of vulnerability is no longer a vague, abstract threat. We’re now much more aware that we all live at the mercies of a million contingencies, most over which we have little control.

However, to our defense, our innate sense that we’re in control and can safeguard our own safety and security should not be too-hastily and too-harshly judged. We can’t help it. It’s the way we’re built.

We’re instinctually geared to hate our weaknesses, our vulnerability, our limitations, and our awareness of our own poverty and are instinctually geared
to want to feel secure, in control, independent, invulnerable, and self-sufficient.

That’s a mercy of grace and nature because it helps save us from despondency and helps us to live with a (needed) healthy pride. But it’s also an illusion; perhaps one that we need for long periods in our lives but also one that in moments of clarity and lucidity we’re meant dispel so as to acknowledge before God and to ourselves that we’re interdependent, not self-sufficient, and not ultimately in control. Whatever else about this virus, it’s bringing us a moment of clarity and lucidity, even if this is far from welcome.

We were given the same lesson, in effect, with the downing of the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11th, 2001. In witnessing this single tragic incident we went from feeling safe and invulnerable to knowing that we are not able, despite everything we have achieved, to ensure our own safety and safety of our loved ones. A lot of people relearned the meaning of prayer that day. A lot of us are relearning the meaning of prayer as we sit quarantined at home during this coronavirus.

Richard Rohr suggests that the passage from childhood to adulthood requires an initiation into a number of necessary life-truths. One of these can be summarized this way: You are not in Control!

If that is true, and it is, then this coronavirus is helping initiate us all into a more mature adulthood. We are becoming more conscious of an important truth.

However, we may not see any divine intent in this. Every fundamentalist voice that suggests that God sent this virus to each of us a lesson is dangerously wrong and is an insult to true faith. Still we need to hear God’s voice inside of it. God is speaking all the time but mostly we aren’t listening; this sort of thing helps serve as God’s microphone to a deaf world.

Illusions aren’t easy to dispel, and for good reasons. We cling to them by instinct and we generally need them to get through life. For this reason, Socrates, in his wisdom, once wrote that “there is nothing that requires as gentle a treatment as the removal of an illusion”. Anything other than gentleness only makes us more resistant.

This coronavirus is anything but gentle. But inside all of its harshness perhaps we might feel a gentle nudge that we help us dispel the illusion that we are in control.