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## LIVING AND DYING: WISDOM, GRACE, RESILIENCE

*A reflection by Josh Becker,*

*Holy Trinity Member and Internal Medicine Physician*

My mind keeps wandering to a patient I have cared for over the past 7 years who we just lost to COVID-19. He was a thin, gregarious, elderly man in his 90s who always wore a smile. With his multiple medical issues and age, he sadly didn't stand much of a chance against the virus after it took hold in his senior living center.

His family could not see him in person in his apartment for the last months of his life because of the risk from the virus, and after he became ill they could not be at his side in the hospital when he died. I was so thankful that his nurse was with him when he passed so that he wasn't alone, but this was only a limited consolation to his daughters. They dropped off his favorite music (Tchaikovsky) and letters that were read to him, and they tried to speak to him with video chats, but it is not the same. As a physician, I have worked with elders as they succumb to disease and age, and each time brings its own grief and loss. But in this instance and during this pandemic, the fact his family was not able to say their good-byes in person has affected me more than I expected. As caregivers, during this pandemic we are working hard to have compassionate exceptions to the rules at hospitals to allow families to see loved ones at the end of their lives. Unfortunately, in this instance, it was not safe for family members themselves nor the health system itself to be physically together. It hurts—none of us wants to die alone—and grieving from a distance makes a loss even less tolerable.

Still, in this case, it is not only how he died, but more importantly how he approached his life. A few years ago I was left with my mouth agape as he recounted the traumas of his early life during a routine office visit. He told me of his early life as a young Jewish boy in Nazi Germany. At age 14—during Kristalnacht in 1938—his mother was killed in front of him and he was left for dead after being stabbed in the shoulder by paramilitary Nazi forces. His father was also attacked and few years later died of complications from his injuries. He told me he lost “so many” family members to the holocaust. I was stunned at the horror he endured and surprised that this particularly optimistic man had endured so much. He recounted how he was later able to escape Germany and fled to Argentina where he became a “cowboy” and trained horses. He emigrated to the United States and served in the US Army. At various points he worked for a trucking company and later owned a thoroughbred horse farm. He was very active in his synagogue throughout his life and had a family who loved him dearly.

(cont. in next column)

## SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

### READINGS

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35;  
1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

He had a special interest in interfaith dialogue and worked with many churches, synagogues, and mosques sharing his story over the years. He spoke at least 5 languages. The man had an amazing story.

Despite all his early suffering, the most noticeable thing about this particular patient was his overwhelming gratitude. His graciousness seemed to be a core part of him. At the news of his death, nurses and caregivers who had not seen him in years told me stories they remembered of him dancing in the hallways and always being a joy. He started every visit I had with him by thanking me for taking care of him, and it always felt so genuine. His accent was distinct—an interesting mix of German with occasional rolled R's (perhaps from his time in Argentina.) I can still hear him say “Zank you zo much Dr. Beckerrrrrrrrrr.” I am really going to miss him.

I also find myself thinking of my patient whenever I hear those among us that make arguments about letting our elders “make their own decisions” when it comes to opening our lives back up during this time we are forced to stay apart. They argue that those at the highest risk from coronavirus can make their own decisions; let everyone else get back to their lives. This simplistic idea is not only wrong epidemiologically—as it puts all people at higher risk with more infections around us and misses the severe illness that can still occur in patients at younger ages that might not lead to death, but still have significant morbidity and require hospitalization and months of rehabilitation—but it also connotes a sense that our elders have less worth to society. There is an inherent ageism in our culture and it comes through loud and clear in these statements. The underlying subtext that those with medical issues or advanced age are expendable in some way angers and saddens me.

I am worried that not all of our society collectively realizes how much we need to protect each other right now. Our individual pain can become so blinding that we lose broader vision of what still needs to be done. There is a lot of anxiety, despair, and economic struggle right now (and I mean A LOT!) with the shut-down. I spend my clinic days now speaking over phone or video conference to people isolated in their homes, those losing their jobs and anxious about our collective uncertainty. It is hard. I too find myself grieving for normalcy that we won't get back to soon. I am grieving the loss of my patient to this disease and all my patients, friends, and family I miss seeing in person.

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## PARISH INFORMATION

That said, I worry too many of us misunderstand the devastation this disease brings upon all of us when we lose our elders prematurely to the coronavirus. As we lose those among us with wisdom gleaned from past historical horrors, we miss out on finding a way through the horror upon us now. I am immensely grateful for the impact my patient had upon me. His grace was his resilience—and this gives me clarity in this time of uncertainty. I am immensely appreciative for this man showing me that I can look upon this grief, acknowledge it, and combat it with grace and gratitude and, through this, a life well lived can emerge.

Thank you to everyone whom I have missed seeing at church and thank you for your sacrifice in staying at home to protect all of us collectively. I look forward to seeing you all in person when the time comes. Stay well.

*Josh Becker MD is an Internal Medicine Physician with Abbott Northwestern Hospital. He works in primary care and hospital medicine, is a faculty member for the Abbott Northwestern Internal Medicine Residency and Adjunct Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of Minnesota School of Medicine. He wrote this piece with the permission of the family of his patient.*

### **2020 JOHNSON SYMPOSIUM**

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to affect daily life across the world, Holy Trinity's leaders are closely monitoring the State of Minnesota and the CDC's recommendations for activity during the pandemic. As we know, public gatherings have been suspended. While we look forward to the day when we can safely gather again, the health, safety, and well-being of our community remain our highest priority.

Unable to anticipate when the restrictions on large group gatherings will be lifted and after thoughtful deliberation, we have decided to cancel the 2020 Johnson Symposium on Faith and Society. We made this decision to exercise an abundance of caution, in keeping with our deep and abiding love for the neighbor. We pray that we will again be able to welcome participants to the Johnson Symposium in 2021.

### **DINNER TOGETHER WITH FREE STREET TACOS AND ZOOM!**

Join us for Dinner Together on Friday, June 5, 7:00 p.m., where HTLC members and friends will break virtual bread together and share in conversation that goes beyond the surface level. The Innovation Team (led by a team of Holy Trinity's young adult leaders) is hosting this event to help bring our community together during this isolating time—and dinner is on us! Order your choice of street tacos from Habanero Tacos (our friendly immigrant-owned restaurant neighbor at 3223 E. Lake Street) through our RSVP form, and we'll take care of the bill. Simply pick up your order between 6:00 and 6:30 p.m., or let us know on your [RSVP](#) if you need a volunteer to deliver your meal to you. Feel free to participate in the Zoom conversation even if you'd prefer to provide your own dinner. We'll use Zoom break-out groups to keep the conversations dinner-party sized. Please complete the [RSVP](#) if you plan to participate and to order your free meal if desired. Taco orders (via the [RSVP](#)) must be received by Saturday, May 30.

### **GENEROSITY**

Donations to the Coronavirus Assistance Fund and to the Church's General Fund (for ongoing operating expenses) can be mailed to the church or given electronically from your [bank account](#) or [credit card](#). We thank you all for your generous giving!

### **WELCOME DEACON DAVID**

Our new Community Engagement Coordinator, Deacon David Rojas Martínez (pronounced DAH-VEED), begins today (Monday, May 18). Deacon David will work to advance our congregation's justice priorities and educational opportunities for all ages. Send Deacon David a note of welcome ([drojasmartinez@htlcmpls.org](mailto:drojasmartinez@htlcmpls.org))!

### **MASKS FOR MINISTRY**

We are working with our ministry partners, Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha (CTUL) and CAIR-MN, to ensure that the communities they support have access to personal protective equipment (e.g., face masks and gloves). Our mask makers are at it again, this time with a goal of creating hundreds of masks. If you can join the sewing team, please contact Deb Sodt ([dksodt@gmail.com](mailto:dksodt@gmail.com)). Fabric, thread, elastic, and patterns can be delivered to your home. Also, please contact Deb Sodt if you have cotton fabric that you are willing to donate to the effort!

### **LONGFELLOW ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION**

Many Holy Trinity members made signs and cheered on the 32 students who graduated from Longfellow Alternative High School on Thursday, May 14. Dr. Udupa, the school principal, wrote a letter to Holy Trinity, saying, "This year has been so different for us. We started with our feasibility study to remain in the same building. Your voices were heard at the district level and our students and staff expressed their joy to stay together as a school with childcare facilities in one building...Now we had to make another adjustment due to COVID-19. We started doing distance learning, and our students and staff rose to this occasion and worked very hard to graduate 32 students. Once again as a community you have stepped up to celebrate their success by being there and bringing smiles to their face and conveying the message that 'we care.'" Gorgeous pictures from this celebration are included in last week's worship video.

### **DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO'S GRADUATING SOON?**

If you or someone you know is graduating from high school, college, trade school, graduate school, or community college, send their name(s) to Sue Roberts ([sroberts@htlcmpls.org](mailto:sroberts@htlcmpls.org)) in the office. We will recognize them in an upcoming worship service.