

"There's a War on, Mate!"

Like most others, I had seen the headlines about some new virus breaking out in China, in a city I'd never even heard of, but it sounded pretty serious, especially when I read they had quarantined the whole city! Wuhan? Never heard of it, sounds important though. As the days went by, the news got worse.

Around 10 am on March 10, while I was having my breakfast (we're slow starters around here), I read the lead article in the Toronto Star calling on the public to take a part in stopping this pandemic because things would get worse before they got better! And, the people most at risk were the very young and seniors, especially if they had any other underlying health problems.

I sipped on my coffee and reached for my tablets; there's about five I take twice a day. Right then, Rosemary mentioned she couldn't find her hearing aid, again. There was also a lot of talk about people coming in from overseas visits, etc. who could be carriers. So, reduce your contact with other people, stay 3 feet apart, and so on.

Then it hit me, that's us! We're seniors, we're senior seniors! And we have two Personal Support Workers coming in twice a day (seldom the same girl two days in a row), and that after visiting other clients. Some even take their holidays overseas, somewhere. It must have been about 10:30 am when the lights went on! Wow! We're like an open door to any virus that wants to stop by and get to know us. This was like a fire onboard the boat, immediate action was imperative. And the health authorities, right there in that article, were calling on the public to take part in stopping this pandemic. The public? That's us, we're part of the public!; We're right there, a potential virus distribution facility, open for business.

The following piece of advice, written by Reinhold Niebuhr, came to mind:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference"

It was not a question of being religious or atheistic, it was a matter of common sense. A few minutes before noon that same day, I sent off an email cancelling all PSW visits, and daycare visits by my wife until further notice. **I congratulated myself on my speedy action and having had the courage to change the things I can.** That done, I continued on my merry way.

A few days went by, and I became increasingly aware that the newspaper was full of articles in one sense or another about the Corona-19 virus; in the main section, in the sports section and the GTA section – it was pervasive! This was a major alert. I sat up and started to take more notice.

Then came last Friday. I needed some groceries and figured I had better go on Friday rather than wait until Saturday when everybody else will be shopping. As I drove away from the house, I noticed most of the houses had a car in the driveway, even though it was a workday. Boy, this virus scare is serious! When I got to Loblaws, there was hardly a cart to be had, certainly none of those smaller yellow ones and only one or two of the larger ones. Hmm, it's really busy here today! The virus again?

Inside the store, it was like one of those dodge'em fair-ground rides of old with hardly any room for people to pass and carts bumping into one another. And the shelves? Many of them were empty. There was no 5 lb. bags of potatoes, no Light Swedish Rye bread and so on. This was like a run on the bank; I guess you could say it was a run on the food bank! I pushed my way around and got to the egg display cabinets, a bit surprised that there were carts in some sort of a line blocking my view, but figured they must be waiting for something being loaded at that time into the yoghurt section. There were so many people here today! I picked up a dozen eggs I had come for and made my way down one of the aisles to the cash.

That's when I found out what the line up near the eggs was for. The line for the cashiers stretched along the front of the store, down the side to the end where the eggs were, and then on again along the back wall to the meat department. I took my place in line. Standing there, my mind was putting it all together: the newspapers flooded with articles about the enemy, the call to the public to get involved lest the system should become overwhelmed, my email cancelling the PSW visits, the lines at the store for food! It all rang a bell! This was war! It brought back memories of World War II. These were the things that we had seen then! Oh, the stores were bigger now, and it wasn't someone behind a counter handing out the cans from a rack behind them, and there weren't any ration cards...yet. It was like WWII again. It all added up. We were at war!

After waiting exactly one hour in the lineup, I returned home to tell my wife what it was like "out there". It frightened her! So much so, I figured it was time to remind her of our place in the scheme of things as seniors, whose opinions were not sought and who couldn't do much anyway, I thought I should remind her of the first part of the Serenity Prayer, "**Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change**".

I didn't really need to point that out to her because she had lived through the whole of the Great Depression and World War II. She knew what it means to buckle down and live under war-time conditions, but she was having a little difficulty with the third part of the prayer: "**And wisdom to know the difference**". She was just worrying too much about everyone else in the world but I told her that we have to concentrate on our part in the required war effort.

We have to keep our minds on our function. We can't affect the overall direction of the war and we can't help other people because we are too old ourselves to be of any practical use, but we can help by putting ourselves into semi-isolation, limiting contact with others, and thereby minimizing the possibility of us unwittingly spreading the virus.

We can also help by staying healthy so as not to place any additional load on the health system which will have its hands full without us adding to their load. **That also comes under the heading of things we can do if we have the courage and determination.**

In retrospect, I realized that seeing the Toronto Star full of articles about the war was a trigger to my thinking. I distinctly remember when I was “going on” 13 years of age asking my mother, when the end of the war was in sight in the spring of 1945, “What do they put in newspapers when the war ends?” After six of my formative years, I had no idea what her answer would be?

“Social things”, she said and gave me some examples but it was all beyond my comprehension. That was a long time ago, but that moment this week when I realized that the papers were full of war news again, the memory of those six years came flooding back. I remembered what war means. The Serenity Prayer says it all.

Gerry Wood, March 16, 2020