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Reaching Out in a Time of Great Uncertainty March 16, 2020

Last week, I was in Cedar Rapids, Iowa for a series of talks and trainings. Part of that had me speaking to LGBTQ-identifying students at my alma mater, Coe College.

After a wonderful conversation over dinner, the meeting was over. As young people left the room, a woman stayed behind. I saw that she was crying; soon she was sobbing. She said to me, "It's all overwhelming. I have no hope."

The young woman said this just an hour before a national emergency was declared, so you can imagine how saw the world.

My response was to share two things with her: first, that humans care about each other far more than anyone knows. I understand this personally because I've seen it play out through my hundreds of trainings. Specifically, I ask folks to choose from 19 different identities when responding to the prompt, "The identity I want to be known for is..."

Consistently—almost magically, time and again, regardless of it being a red or a blue or even a "Bernie" locale—90-95% of the room chooses one identity: Compassion.

I also reminded the young woman that she had grit and resiliency which she hadn't yet tapped. "You're here," I said. "You've been able to survive many challenges already, and yet you are still here."

After a half hour of my cheerleading, my new friend seemed more even-keeled. "Thank you, Ellie," she said. "I'm grateful."

Readers, yes, it's a time of great stress and upheaval. However, please know that some day in the future weeks, we will be past this crisis. I know that's slight consolation right now, but it is true: we will get through this.

That doesn't mean we're not afraid, or that we don't feel lost and perhaps a bit hopeless. I get all of that.

Yet, I want to remind you of what I said to the Coe student: we humans care for each other way more than what most believe. On top of that, we almost always have more grit and resiliency than we initially believe.

Please let these two things—our compassion for each other and our own individual grit/resiliency—comfort you as we go forward into this abyss. We will get through this.

I promise.

For those looking for something additional, here are five ideas on what you can do—while also staying safe yourself:

1. If you are outside the virus risk demographics, consider offering to shop/run errands for those in your network who are at risk. Practice social distancing, which can include delivering groceries or items at a front door without personal interaction.
2. Put pen to paper or notecard and write a letter to someone who's struggling with fear; let them know that you are there for them. In the same correspondence share a memory of them/how they have impacted your life.
3. Learn technology that will allow you and someone who is isolating to communicate via screens. Here's a great primer on what's available/the pros and cons: <https://www.cnet.com/news/7-free-videoconferencing-apps-facetime-skype-zoom-and-more-compared/> I'm not at all technically adroit and I've been able to figure out Skype and Zoom. You can too!
4. Understand that some groups—particularly those who identify as Asian—are being subjected to "Othering" in public in the form of looks, comments or body language by strangers. Be aware of this and speak up as an ally to protect someone.
5. If you must venture out—god forbid, but it will be necessary for some—make sure to thank those staffing the stores or pharmacies. Those folks are literally risking their lives for us.

Take care and be well. Practice safe and compassionate humaning (I know, that's not actually a word; I don't care). It's important for all of us and for our country, this place we call America!

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