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COMMUNICATION

How will we connect when lockdown ends?

By Deacon Tim O'Toole

My Irish Catholic father was an FBI counter-espionage agent who told me years ago that everyone has a story they are dying to tell. No need for torture or waterboarding. Russians loved American bourbon, the tonic that got the saga of their life journeys flowing.

Two weeks ago, I had the opportunity to chat with people waiting outside Albany Med's Delmar vaccination clinic. It was the first chance I'd had to talk with total strangers at length since the pandemic hit America.

A bright sun and strong breeze provided plenty of fresh air, while masks and six feet of separation encouraged civil conversation with folks, as new arrivals increased the line outside the door. That brief, heartening experience got me to thinking.

How will we respond in the months ahead when face-to-face replaces Zoom? Will we initiate in-depth conversations with interesting people? Or will we devolve into banal chatter about the weather, sports or traffic conditions?

The New and Old Testaments, ancient Talmud scholars, Quran and Veda

(sacred Hindu texts) verses all have advice and tips for how to deepen conversation and how talking can enrich life. Now that lockdown is loosening and our paths will cross with strangers, it's time to use that ancient wisdom to get to know each other better.

For those of us weary of email, texting and Zoom meetings, 2 John 1:12 looks forward to the coming of the New Normal with this guidance; "Having many things to write unto you, I would not write them with paper and ink: but I hope to come unto you, and to speak face to face, that your joy may be made full."

Great! But you do need an icebreaker. I plan to seek substantive discourse with people from all walks of life. While respecting their privacy I will want to say: "Tell me about your journey." America is a magnet for all kinds of folks from around the globe, "Where are you from?" might yield varied responses, like "South Troy," or "South Sudan."

Geographical point of origin is just the start. Everyone has an interesting story to tell, and once they get over the shock of finding someone who wants to listen, a floodgate of details will open. No



Lori Van Buren / Times Union

Dog walkers going in opposite directions stop to chat as they make their way around Iroquois Lake in Central Park on Feb. 5 in Schenectady.

need for enhanced interrogation techniques. I might ask, "What brought you to Albany?" Some would reply: "I was born here." Others might respond with family immigration stories from near or far — like the couple I met outside that Delmar clinic, who relocated from rural Illinois.

Perhaps others came to our state, or our shore, fleeing oppression or persecution. Education and economic opportunity might enter the conversation. Every year we add doctors, nurses, pharma-

cists and computer wizards, electricians, engineers, and automotive technicians to the workforce. Others come here for the chance to practice their religion freely, like the Sikh attendants at my local gas station. Chat with a newcomer here and you may find yourself enjoying a deep and thoughtful discourse. Just remember to be guided by compassion.

1 Corinthians 13:1 must have envisioned Twitter and our current crop of politicians: "If I speak with the tongues of men

and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

We take this for granted, sleeping in on Sunday morning, or golfing when the spirit should be moving us in a different direction. Then there are those who relocated here because we are more tolerant of sexual orientation and gender identity. Exiles of a sort, bereft of family and friends, developing new social networks independent of the Internet.

What is expected of you if the person you chat with

has had a dark journey? The Quran enjoins the faithful to "speak nicely to people" (al-Baqarah:83), and when you speak, be fair, even if it concerns a close relative" (al-An'am:153), something to bear in mind when family dinners resume in 2021. The months of isolation and alienation are ending.

Will you respond with confidence and compassion to a nosy stranger who seeks to reconnect with the humanity that abounds in our community? Hinduism's sacred texts promise a reward for conversations deeper than Twitter, The Bhagavad Gita: "When a person responds to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were his own, he has attained the highest state of spiritual union."

Will conversation lead to new friendships? Much of that depends on you. As the Bhagavad Gita advises: "Approach those who have realized the purpose of life and question them with reverence and devotion; they will instruct you in this wisdom."

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