

Column
Creativity and Uncertainty
by Elizabeth Denham Thompson
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I've been thinking a lot about creativity lately.

A few weeks ago, I was asked what gave me hope, especially with COVID-19 shelter-in-place guidelines beginning to impact the United States. My answer was that creativity was emerging around me as people shifted with the uncertainties in order to make things work.

However, what started as a burst of energy to make-do for a short time, has become exhaustion as we have moved into a more chaotic world with what is now a long-term, chronic shift.

To use the overused phrases, we are in unprecedented times and experiencing a paradigm shift.

I have listened to a wide variety of people talk about their lives now that we are moving into months rather than weeks of uncertainty.

What I'm finding is that the qualities we use to describe an uncertainty that is exhausting and overwhelming, are often the same ones needed for creativity and vision:

- Unpredictability and chaos
- Returning to basics
- Admitting there are problems
- Being honest with fears, hopes and dreams
- Clarifying priorities
- Awareness of the power in what is seemingly invisible
- Paradox in focusing on the small while also looking at the larger context
- Failing, trying again and failing yet again
- Remembering how interconnected we are
- Remembering old skills and knowledge
- Learning new skills
- Moments of grief, loss and helplessness
- Moments of inspiration, insight and gratitude
- Trusting in ourselves – enough of the time
- Trusting the process – enough of the time
- Trusting in others, including God – enough of the time

Necessity has required us to take risks, not knowing what the outcome will be.

We have had to trust the key values that define our identity, while letting go of the forms and structures that have held them. We have had to lean into the uncertainty, unsure and yet trusting that a new way will open.

I don't think we should, nor ever will, "go back to normal." We may however, "fail forward" toward new visions and endeavors.

To recognize the creativity that is happening is not to minimize the horrific numbers of deaths still occurring or the impact that this is having, especially on those already marginalized in our society.

We need to be clear that much of the angst and exhaustion in this chaotic period of time is because this pandemic has ripped apart our complacency. We have had to, and will continue to need to, develop alternate ways of functioning that break our previously stable and expected ways of moving and operating in the world.

However, it is because of this duality that I am encouraged by the stories that continue to surface of how this crisis has often driven and fueled a connective creative process.

From redesigned ventilator usage, to online schooling by every teacher in America, to musical and theater home performances, to online mental health therapy, to family gatherings via internet, to 99% of all worship services moving online – within a week, to late night shows produced from homes with the host's children as part of the production, and the delight that 80- and 90-year-olds are learning how to use computers to log-in to Zoom!

We've experienced and watched in real time how adjustments have been made. We've seen and experienced what it means to adapt because we have had to.

We have lived the chaos, but we have also lived the creativity on a world-wide scale, and all of that will re-form who we are as individuals, families, communities, businesses, people of faith and, I hope, as governments in the world.

In 2006, Margaret Wheatley wrote Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World. The brief book summary on the back cover seems prophetic and descriptive of what we are experiencing now in 2020:

"We live in a time of chaos, rich in potential for new possibilities. A new world is being born. We need new ideas, new ways of seeing, and new relationships to help us now. New science ... biology, chaos theory, and quantum physics ... displays the intricate webs of cooperation that connect us. It assures us that life seeks order but uses messes to get there."

We live in messy times right now, with competing and often overwhelming demands. What has been the order has been torn asunder.

Yet the uncertain and chaotic conditions that cause us alarm, frustration and fear have also been the conditions that inspire and even demand creativity, vision and transformation.

As we acknowledge the difficulties, I encourage us to also lean into them to create a new way forward.