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From the Editor

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From the Editor

Here's a story of which we cannot see the ending.

The story begins in mid-March, after a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) reached American shores, and it became clear that this was serious—really, really serious. Restaurants and shops closed down. Most of our NECU schools told their students not to return to classes after spring break; instead, school would move online. States mandated their residents to stay at home unless their work was deemed essential. A shortage of toilet paper in early March gave way to a shortage of morgues by the end of April. People taped construction paper hearts to their windows and left thank you notes and hand sanitizer for UPS workers. Sports disappeared. *Flattening the curve*, *social distancing*, *six feet apart*, and *sheltering-in-place* became household terms.

Interwoven with this crisis in personal and public health was the hemorrhaging of the economy. By the end of July, the GDP had plummeted to almost two-thirds of its previous annual rate. The U.S. unemployment rate, which averages at about 5.75 percent since World War II, skyrocketed to almost 15 percent in April. While Covid-19 seemed, at least at first, not to discriminate between its victims, the pandemic-driven recession, like the coronavirus itself, immediately targeted the most vulnerable. Grocery store and fast food workers deemed “essential” wondered whether that really meant “disposable.”

Then, the divisions became politicized. The debate over how and whether to reopen the economy started to fall along partisan lines, with maskless libertarians protesting shelter-in-place orders and demanding their right to work, as mask-shaming liberals boycotted businesses that neglected safety precautions. The pandemic-driven recession is certainly a symptom of Covid-19, but treating it can worsen the disease. States in the Sun Belt who reopened aggressively around Memorial Day soon saw a spike in cases and shut back down by the Fourth of July.

Some now wonder whether a global capitalistic economy, with safety nets for few and the exploitation of many, primarily experiences the effect of the health crisis or is something closer to its cause.

While the epidemic outbreak and economic meltdown happened in lockstep, a third pandemic broke out later in the summer, surprising many with its force and speed. Many of us who, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, “believe ourselves white” responded to the belated news reports of Ahmaud Arberry’s murder on February 23 much like we had responded to early reports of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China—with interest in and mild concern for something affecting *other* people. The same was true for Breonna Taylor’s death on March 13 by the Louisville Police Department. But when George Floyd died under the knee of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, our nation’s long-time pandemic of police brutality and systemic racism fully presented itself to all America. An accompanying outbreak of uprisings, vigils, and protests hit Minneapolis and spread throughout the world. In, with, and under the pandemic of Covid-19 is the equally deadly pandemic of police brutality, widespread white supremacy, and the mass incarcerations and executions of Black America.

Taking institutionalized racism alongside an extractive economy, partisan politics, and global contagion, it becomes difficult to sort out the primary disease from symptoms and underlying conditions. Is this one pandemic or many? If the latter, they certainly feed off one another. We know, for example, that higher contraction and death rates of Black, Brown, and Native Americans correlates in turn with insufficient health care, untreated chronic



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preconditions, the working conditions of essential/disposable workers, and other structural sins.

It matters how we tell this story. To be liberally educated means to be able to critically examine such stories, to hear them with critical and self-critical ears. Who are the heroes, and what are their flaws? Who is villainized? Is redemption and healing still open to them? What kind of story is this? Whose interests does it serve? Who gets to tell it?

Actually, the ability to critically investigate the stories we tell is only half of what it means to be liberally educated. The other half involves the ability to tell stories and thus to make meaning in the first place. Liberal arts colleges, especially those that are church-related, want our students to form character as well as acquire skills. To form and know your character is to come to know yourself as a character in a larger story. It is to find yourself in a story that you did not create but can fully own and narrate. It is to understand yourself and your world as having a plot, meaning, and purpose—above and beyond the random incidences

and coincidences that too often decide how we live. This is another way of saying that Lutheran liberal arts schools educate for *vocation*. They want students to form the kinds of selves and live the kinds of lives that are attuned to—and can capably respond to—the needs and callings of others.

So, the story of our Lutheran schools must be a story about responsibility, about the ability to respond to the unbidden call to educate in unprecedented ways, and to do so through multiple, crisscrossing pandemics. That's not easy, to say the least. And yet, with our lives stripped down—very few sports and musical ensembles (if any) on campus, fewer off-campus parties (we hope), real conversations with exhausted students dropping into our virtual office hours—this may be the right moment to reflect on why each of us is here. In this long and painful time, we might just hear a still, small voice reminding us of the larger purposes of education and the crucial importance of our commonplace callings.

SAVE THE DATE FOR NEXT SUMMER'S

Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference

2021 THEME | **CALLED TO PLACE**

The gathering will explore how the unique physical and cultural geographies of NECU campuses shape their callings toward building just communities.

The planning committee is considering options for a virtual or in-person conference in July 2021. Please look for further announcements in early 2021.