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***The World at a Distance: Corona and the Year of Silence:* Have We Developed New Ways to Listen to the Spirit as Communities of Care?**

Ruth MacNeil¹

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now – and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.²

In the opening moments of *The World at a Distance: Corona and the Year of Silence*,³ the only sound that is heard is the ticking of a clock. Is time running out for humanity, or is the world marking time as we wait to return to our previous existence before the pandemic? From the stillness of a Japanese temple to the anger experienced in a Brazilian Favela, contrasting scenes placed in juxtaposition within the film prompt the viewer to contemplate whether the world will truly pause to see the disparity of those in need within our own communities and around the world.

In Yokosuka, Fujio Sôin, a Japanese priest, contemplates the difference between Western views of “following the rules”⁴ to the outlook of Japanese culture:

The Japanese think of their neighbors first. It is not about following rules, but about putting oneself in the position of the other person. To not meet each other [staying home to stop the spread of the virus] was a sign of love.⁵

The spirit at work within this community is caring for others before yourself. Sôin is fortunate. Speaking from the quietness of the temple and the tranquility of the garden, Sôin sees the destruction that the coronavirus has caused: people contemplating suicide and families grieving as loved ones have already taken their own life or have died as a result of the pandemic. To these tragedies Sôin has adapted by teaching Zen meditation online to those who cannot be physically present to participate. Through the work of the Spirit, Sôin has reached out to his community in a new way. Recognizing that the current virus may continue to mutate, his hope is that humanity will also continue to change, believing that “we humans are capable of causing a pandemic of kindness, love and consideration.”⁶

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² Romans 8:22. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ *The World at a Distance: Corona and the Year of Silence*, directed by Jobst Knigge and Cristina Trebbi, produced by The Ontario Educational Communications Authority (TVO), aired March 21, 2021, on TVO docs, <https://www.tvo.org/video/documentaries/the-world-at-a-distance-corona-and-the-year-of-silence>

⁴ *The World at a Distance*, 00:54:45.

⁵ *The World at a Distance*, 00:55:15–28.

⁶ *The World at a Distance*, 01:01:04.

In sharp contrast to the peace of the Dokuon temple and garden is the harshness of the Favela in Rio de Janeiro. Life within this crowded community is hard, with the pandemic intensifying the expanse between those who can afford to physically distance themselves and others who must work to survive. Overhead photos capture images of a communal grave site with figures once full of life now waiting to be placed in the ground. From the images of a congested shantytown the voice of Macarrão, a rapper from within the Favela, speaks to the privilege of those with affluence:

Isolation is a privilege. We had no right to isolate. The people of the Favelas must work, so that the elite can isolate themselves. It is already decided who will live and who will die. There was no quarantine within the Favelas. The people have to fight for their survival every day.⁷

Does the world see the struggles of the people in the Favelas? Do we as individuals see the plight of those whose severity in life we cannot even imagine? The Spirit groans for us to care for creation and for each other. We feel its pull through the images seen on television: in the stories of hardship, of forests burning out of control, and the calls for justice through the Black Lives Matter protests. These impressions of suffering stand in sharp contrast to the stillness of a world so silenced that the chirping of crickets and birds is heard in the middle of Paris. Active and imaginative, there is evidence of the Spirit moving people to dynamically engage within their community. People find new ways to dance, hug, and sing. Those in hospital are amused online by people in clown costumes, and nurses navigate a busy street to allow a COVID-19 patient the opportunity to see an ocean sunset and feel the breeze on their face.

Marcus Lambron suggests that “maybe Covid is an enemy of lies ... redeeming us from individualism ... less cheating ... less false pretenses.”⁸ However, there is also sorrow of the Spirit in the most startling underlying contrast of the movie – the stillness created by the forced pause of the pandemic bringing into sharper focus the inequalities between nations. Will we continue to listen to the Spirit’s outcry for justice and equality of our fellow human beings, or will we silence the voice of the Spirit and forget as the pandemic wanes and the busyness of life returns?⁹

⁷ *The World at a Distance*, 00:49:05–17.

⁸ *The World at a Distance*, 01:18:40.

⁹ On a personal note, I am struck by the irony of this final statement when watching the scene from Juanchaco, Colombia, near the end of the film (beginning at time 01:19:00). In this scene, with images of empty hotels and restaurants in the background, a young man mourns the loss of livelihood that has occurred without tourism. In this setting, those with affluence directly influence the outcome of others – most individuals not by being moved by the Spirit to act within the community, but rather by their indifference to others as consumers. The young man indicates, “tourists from all over the world came here for the whales, for surfing, culture, music, food. After seven months without tourism we can see the consequences already. As if a hurricane had passed through here. It is brutal. Because after all ... it was our dream.”