

Fighting the Pandemic

Fighting the pandemic of COVID-19 is really not like fighting a war. Comparisons are, as my grandfather used to say, “stretchers.”

In the first place, the front line “troops” we have in place, the health care workers and hospital administrators, have had little training in this kind of massive fight - unlike the army recruits who spend 10 weeks at basics and the lieutenants and colonels who work their ways up the warfare disciplines over years. It is happily true that our health care workers do know how to care for patients, and they know the rules of Infection Control. They are heroically practicing them in the face of real personnel risk.

In the second place, those who might be considered generals guiding those troops, that is our governmental leadership, have had precious few plans in place to deal with such an event as this pandemic, in spite of the warnings of such sages as Anthony Fauci and Bill Gates. That is no way to fight a war. In the third place, our current battle requires our brains, not our muscles and guns. And the brains of the leadership seem confused. Or at least the messages that are coming from the top are confusing.

But at least the “call to arms,” as if in war, carries with it some feeling of inspiration that brings us out beyond our self-interests, and a feeling of community standing shoulder to shoulder doing anything we can. We sure need those things.

So how are we fighting this pandemic? Here are some brief notes to bring into focus some of the “weapons” at our command.

Unfortunately, we have nothing that specifically targets the germ, SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease COVID-19. Those may come, and happily there is a lot of energy now being poured into developing such weapons: drugs, immune globulin and a vaccine. How soon each of these will be available, we don't know.

The only weapon that you and I have right now against the germ itself is social distancing. You know what that is. If you don't, please look up the rules. If you do but aren't practicing them, please please reconsider. It really is your responsibility to yourself as well as to your family, friends and neighbors, to do so. Interrupting the cycle of transmission by social distancing can mean saving people from illness and possibly from death. As our admirable Governor Cuomo nostalgically says: no basketball games.

What else is in our “quiver of arrows?” Self-isolation. We should do this if we have been exposed to a person who likely has COVID-19. The reason we should self-isolate rests on the assumption that we ourselves may have the infection, even if we don't have symptoms, and we don't want to spread the germ further. Self-isolation is a stricter set of rules than social distancing. You can look up those rules too.

Another “arrow” is case finding. Case finding happens when someone is identified as being infected with the SARS-CoV-2, either in the hospital or in the community. The patient’s circle of close contacts may then be tested to determine whether they are infected. If someone in that circle is identified as having the virus, maybe again carrying it without symptoms but still able to transmit it silently to others, that newly identified case is put into self-isolation.

Regrettably, the availability of testing is very limited, another analogy to a weapon in war that falters. It falters because in a war, we have huge arsenals of prepared weapons. Here, we had the warning of the need, but the generals didn’t pay attention in a timely fashion. Lives have been damaged and lost as a result.

We do have another set of weapons at hand. We can check on our neighbors and friends, from a safe distance, of course. We can attend to their needs if they have limited capacity or are self isolating. We can also attend to our community needs. Specifically, we can pay attention to our local community leaders when they message us with suggestions or requirements. We can attend as strictly as possible to the new rules of life and require of our close contacts that they do the same. And we can do whatever we can to let those of us who are still serving the community in their roles as mail carriers, store check out ladies, garbage collectors, and healthcare workers, that we tremendously respect their on-going willingness to serve. And if we have the energy, we as individuals can find ways to serve.

People across the world are certainly struggling against this pandemic. We will prevail, although with painfully many sicknesses and deaths. We will prevail, if we use our wits. Please stand shoulder to shoulder with us and use yours.

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