

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

## Commentary: The gift within the quarantine



(Getty Images)

### **During this time of isolation, embrace opportunity to purge distractions and focus on self**

Almost every morning since I've been working from home these past few months, I watch my neighbors argue. I open my garage door, set up my stationary bike in the driveway, pedal hard for about 30 minutes and observe the drama. It's amazing how that tiny bird can dive-bomb the much bigger and noisier crow. They squawk and chirp at each other as they shoot straight up in the air, straight down, the crow making evasive maneuvers that the pilots at the nearby Miramar air station can only dream about. When the big crow finally flies to a nearby pine tree, the little bird flies back to the top of a palm tree, just a few feet away.

The two still face each other and argue from their respective perches. Classic schoolyard taunting, only in different octaves. Something about each other's mothers, no doubt, with maybe an occasional "... and the horse you rode in on!"

Then the crow glides toward the palm tree and the aerial battle picks up again. Eventually the crow gives up and flies away, squawking something like "You haven't seen the last of me!" The little bird returns to the top of his tree where, presumably there is a nest to protect, and remains silent and attentive.

I'm thinking that this is what the quarantine has been like. Some of my writer friends feel that it's really no different from the way they typically live, hunkered down in front of their computers or notepads, reading, researching, typing. They're used to isolation. But most of us aren't. And if there is a silver lining in this pandemic cloud, it is that many of us have been forced to confront what it means to be by ourselves without the usual distractions.

In 1654, the scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." There is even some research at the [University of Virginia to back that up](#). I would augment that to include our inability to take a walk in our neighborhood without looking down at our phones.

Why is it so hard to live without distractions? What are we left with when we don't have them? We just have ourselves. Which may be a good thing. Or not.



Dean Nelson  
(Marcus Emerson)

Even in quarantine there are still some distractions worth chasing away. Like that crow across the street, they are taunting us, and even trying to invade our personal space, demanding our attention. Not all of them deserve our constant consideration, though. As a journalist and a journalism professor, it pains me to tell my friends to stop having a constant flow of news into their homes. Keep informed, I tell them, but do it in small bites. Much of what is posing for news is repetitive at best, and speculative and incorrect at worst. Dial it back and turn it off for a while, I tell them. And social media feeds aren't really feeding you. They could be poisoning you.

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Just sit with yourself a bit, I tell them. There are some good discoveries to be made there. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, "It is difficult to find happiness within oneself, but it is impossible to find it anywhere else."

But that crow of distraction is relentless.

Several years ago two friends and I trekked and camped in Tibet. The first few days I suffered from altitude sickness — we were at 17,000 feet — that rendered me useless for any adventures. But if you're going to be forced into contemplation, Tibet is the place to be. I could sit in my hostel room and listen to the bells and the chants from the nearby temple, and inhale the incense from down the hall. My head pounded as if a railroad spike had been driven into it, but I sat and listened and breathed. It was excruciating. Sometimes I sat in a temple, lit only with the heavily scented yak-waxed candles. One evening I sat at the edge of a lake where Tibetan Buddhist monks are said to have seen visions. I began to get used to sitting quietly because it was all I could physically do, and eventually the throbbing in my skull began to wane.

My friends and I went to a village velcroed onto a mountain slope, and decided to split up for the day. We didn't set a time to reconnect. We just said we'd get back together somehow, somewhere, eventually. I hiked along the edge of a river that was moving with such ferocity that it easily turned a prayer wheel the size of a grain silo built into its banks. I gazed at the prayer wheel and river for a very long time, feeling the knot in my brain slowly loosen. I had a book and a journal in my backpack, but for some reason I didn't take them out. A gray, long-haired horse wandered over and stood next to me. We looked at one another for what felt like several minutes. Neither one of us had anywhere we had to be, so we just remained there. I gave him part of my granola bar.

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Eventually, I closed my eyes and just listened to the river and the breathing of the horse. I could feel my mind race at first (how long was I going to sit here? How will I find my friends again? What is the next school year going to be like? Am I hungry? How does my head feel? Are my legs falling asleep?), but then it gradually slowed down to ... nothing. I began thinking of the people I loved. My wife, my son, my daughter, and tears began flowing from my eyes. Not sobs. They were like the river — plentiful and steady, coming from a deep, deep place in a mountain that had developed an opening.

And one word kept coming to me. Gratitude, gratitude, gratitude.

The Persian poet Rumi wrote, "Observe the wonders as they occur around you. Don't claim them. Feel the artistry moving through, and be silent."

That day in Tibet I observed and felt the silence, and was overwhelmed by the love that filled in.

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I wonder if this is what Jesus was getting at when he said, "The Kingdom of God is within you."

The Christian missionary E. Stanley Jones wrote this in the 1940s, but he could have been writing about it now, as our cities are boiling over and our authorities ignore the real issues that have caused the eruptions: "The outer arrangements of men are awry because the inner arrangements of men

are awry. For the whole of the outer arrangements of life rests upon the inner. Men cannot get along with each other because they can't get along with themselves." Seems like we're battling a virus from the outside and a virus from the inside.

This morning I went out to my driveway and started riding my exercise bike, ready to watch the avian battle across the street. But today, there was no crow. The small bird sat at the top of the palm tree. Nothing was happening. Except the bird was singing.

*Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University, and the founder and host of the annual Writer's Symposium By The Sea. His most recent book is "Talk To Me: How To Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers, and Interview Anyone Like a Pro," published by HarperCollins in 2019.*

*June 28th, 2020*

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