Opinion
Spirituality
News



Shoppers enter a Seattle grocery store March 17 near a sign requesting social distancing, following reports of coronavirus cases in the area. (CNS/Reuters/David Ryder)



by Mike Jordan Laskey

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Here's the truth: I don't have a single coherent thought right now.

Maybe you also feel totally overwhelmed by information: news updates, statistics, projections, calls not to panic, scientific papers that make you panic anyway, lists of ways to pray with your family, ideas for connecting online, homeschooling lesson plans, recommendations of TV shows to binge, so many press conferences. I feel like my head is going to explode. Plus, to quote religion journalist Ruth Graham on Twitter, "I keep thinking that now is still the Before Times."

It doesn't help that I am, in the words of a helpful therapist I used to see, a "catastrophic thinker." I always feel danger lurking, even when it's imaginary. Now that it seems really real and also beyond my control and could have devastating effects on people I love? Well. I'm already exhausted from stress and it's like Day 8 out of who knows how many dozens of days like this (and worse) to come. My head is definitely going to explode.

I need to slow it all down. I need a lot less content right now. (To paraphrase Sideshow Bob from "The Simpsons," I'm aware of the irony of producing content in order to decry it, so don't bother pointing that out!)

If I can clear out the mental, spiritual clutter for one second, drilling down to just one thing to hold on to this morning, I think it's this: It's time to make a habit out of scheduling virtual hangouts with people I care about. Our family connects with spread-out relatives like this fairly often already, but we need to step up the intentionality, including setting up conversations with folks who are usually text-only friends.

That's it. That's going to be my coronavirus-related focus for the next few days. (In addition to my family responsibilities and a strong commitment to social distancing, that is.) Maybe I'll try other self-care things next week, but this is where I'm starting. The threat of a loneliness and isolation epidemic is real, but we have blessed

technology to at least head that off for a while.

Of course, it's a real privilege to be able to pick and choose what to focus on this way. I'm working from home with an extremely flexible and generous employer. My wife is doing the same. We are healthy and comfortable in a safe house and neighborhood. These are all things I take for granted. Hopefully never again.

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I also hope this type of virtual connecting can help me stay more in the moment instead of mentally wandering into the uncertain future.

There is one thing I wasn't able to fully enjoy because of fear.

Someone posted the idea in our neighborhood Facebook group early this week. For St. Patrick's Day, what if people hung pictures of shamrocks in their window so families with little kids could go on walks and look for them in a socially-distanced scavenger hunt? My wife loved the idea, as she's searching for stuff to entertain our young children. So, she forwarded the post to the neighborhood email list, which got dozens and dozens of replies — folks sharing their street so families might know where to look.

She took our kids out St. Patrick's Day morning while I worked. "People did it!" my wife texted from their walk. "And I've also seen people looking for them!"

Another mom emailed to say she and her kids had found 247 shamrocks on an hourlong walk.

These little moments of neighborliness are popping up everywhere, like the balcony singing in Italy. They are lovely. And I do not enjoy them because I immediately think: If a third of our neighborhood is sick next month, will a family walking down the street be charming or a threat?

Of course, a situation like that's possible. Heck, maybe the internet will fail within a month or two. But I am accomplishing nothing by worrying this way and actively making life worse for myself and those socially distancing with me. Sharing conversations with people I value seems to help take some of this edge off. So that's what I'm doing. And I hope to get to all the great ideas for stuff to watch and read

and creative ways to pray and stirring op-eds later.

[Mike Jordan Laskey is senior communications manager for the Jesuit Conference in Washington, D.C. He is the author of The Ministry of Peace and Justice (Liturgical Press) and lives with his family in Maryland.]

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