



“At a Distance” - Wednesday, April 1, 2020 “ Perceptions and Realities”

Long, long ago back in the Stone Age when I was in college, I was blessed with an amazing professor who also happened to be my academic advisor. His name is Dr. John Penny and I am so indebted to Dr. Penny for so many things. One of the ideas that Dr. Penny kept repeating and repeating to me until I both understood and believed it was his idea of “Academic Fearlessness.” Even back in my day, students were increasingly being driven by the primary goal of achieving the highest grade-point average possible, sometimes while minimizing the amount of brainpower expended.

There were “easy professors” and “easy courses” with the infamous and informal “Easy A” designation by the students ensuring jam-packed lecture halls for some instructors; while leaving the academically rigorous professors wondering where everyone was. This culture of “gradesmanship” was not simply because it was getting increasingly more difficult to get into professional or graduate schools, or to get a good job after graduation. During the Vietnam war low grades meant possible loss of a student deferment from the draft and a possible death sentence in a remote jungle across the world. All majors from art history to zoology have “required” courses that one needs to complete for graduation. This left “gradesmanship” to the academic art of selecting the right “elective” or optional courses. It was here that Dr. Penny’s concept of “Academic Fearlessness” was really tested. I remember him so clearly saying to me that picking this or that particular elective was my chance to “leave the comfortable nest of my major” and “soar somewhere new and exciting”. Well, as usual, I took Dr. Penny’s advice to the letter and in this semester, I selected an advanced elective from the pre-med curriculum... histology. Histology is the art and science practiced by pathologists, cell biology researchers and other lab-centric individuals, of identifying cell types and cellular structures under the microscope. This course did absolutely test my “academic fearlessness” but also taught me amazing life lessons as well. Thank you Dr. Penny!

The first thing that one learns in Histology is to never rely on one’s initial impression of the classification of the cell or cellular structure that you have on your slide under your microscope. First impressions are often inaccurate or downright misleading, and by being too hasty to identify what you might be looking at could result in a conclusion that is completely incorrect. Initial perceptions are not necessarily accurate realities! In histological analysis it often takes several clicks of the microscope to visually push down into the interior structures of a cell to properly identify it. Staying on the surface perceptions is always dangerous, in both histology and life. It is only after we have seen the “other reality” of a deep and penetrating look at the cell, or now our social situation, can we properly identify our true reality and name it.

Blessed Ones, we have this exact situation before us now with our COVID-19 challenges, just as I did those many years ago on a histology slide in a classroom long ago and far away. Surface perceptions vs. deep realities. For many of us, yes, our surface realities have changed. We have to work from home while managing our littles. Our gyms and churches are

closed. We are apart from one another. Yet, most of us are still healthy, we have well-stocked pantries and freezers, we are catching up on our reading, going to the grocery store when we need to, walking the dog. Surface realities.

Clicking our microscope now two or three clicks down, we see a different cellular view, a deeper reality that is vastly different than our initial perception on the surface. We see an ICU full of critical COVID-19 patients, most on ventilators, now in ever increasing short supply. We see heroic ICU and ED health care professionals saving their N-95 facemasks in a repurposed closet shoe rack, because they only get one per shift. We see family members of critical patients having to stay away from their loved ones as they cross. Chaplains providing final blessings and Sacrament of the Sick through the glass of the closed ICU room doors, or simply praying in hallways outside the rooms of patients. Taping messages of support, encouragement and love onto the window glass in different languages... English, Spanish, Russian... We love you, stay strong... or in some cases... "Good-bye My Love" or "Via con Dios, Mi Amor". This is the deeper reality of the social histology microscope of COVID-19 that most have not yet seen or experienced personally.

Do not be deceived, Blessed Ones, into believing that your first look is the true look. The reality of this disease lies deeper and narrower in our field of view. This narrower reality is playing out and evolving just blocks away from us at Legacy Salmon Creek Hospital, Peace Health Southwest, Peace Health Longview, Emmanuel, and in every hospital in Washington.

Please stay strong Blessed Ones. Keep doing the "Next Right Thing" as we always say. Keep looking deep for the true realities. Keep being academically, prayerfully, spiritually fearless.

Stay strong, stay healthy, stay connected, stay home.

Blessings,

*Father Joe*