

War On Both Fronts

For the vast majority of us here in Rock-bridge, the health effects of the coronavirus pandemic have been mostly an inconvenience, coupled with some anxiety about being infected. For some, it's been a severe economic hardship, because of losing a job or threats to their business.

Protesters, and even the president with his "liberate" tweets, have seized on the economic disruption as the most pressing issue, trumping the public health crisis. Others say that orders need to remain in place for a while longer, with nonessential businesses remaining closed. Neither position takes into account that both crises – public health and economic - are causing massive suffering and look to last for a while longer.

Frankly, I don't understand why we can't address both at the same time. This column is



being written on May 8, the 75th anniversary of VE day, commemorating Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. We showed the world then that the United States could mobilize every facet of American life to win the war. Americans shared a sense of common purpose, and were called upon to make sacrifices such as rationing of goods, restrictions on travel, and being drafted into the armed forces where some made the ultimate sacrifice.

The pandemic and the economic fallout from it make it seem as though the country is revisiting the war and the Great Depression all at the same time. It means that, like in World War II, we are fighting a two-front war. We were able to succeed and achieve ultimate victory on both fronts; in Europe and in the Pacific, through sacrifice, organization of the country's resources and production and through the leadership not just of a president, but by thousands of civilian and military personnel. And that is what will be required to win this two-front war against both a disease and an economic depression. We can not minimize the danger of downplaying the gravity of both plagues as equally fraught for the country and the world.

It seems to me that there are several things that have to happen to overcome the twin crises. First, we need a pragmatic, not a political, approach to blunting the spread of the virus. Politicians should remember that true political capital will accrue from real progress on both fronts.

Look at the countries that have had success. In most cases, there has been a higher percentage of the population being tested, and testing has centered around identifying people likely to be infected, but not necessarily showing symptoms. Contact tracing of those testing positive has been an important part of this, and that's been sorely lacking in the U.S. Continued social distancing will have to be a part of life for a while longer. Treatments and vaccines must be pursued relentlessly but scientifically. No more amateur-hour promotion of unproven drugs!

Tough rules, guided by public health best practices, to my thinking, offer the only hope of restoring the public's confidence in venturing out to shop, travel and lift the economy. The government can't continue to pass enormous stimulus bills and hand out money. Getting to the point where people will get on an airplane and travel for vacations, or shop in

person in a mall is going to require that they have confidence that they won't be infected. Some countries have used smartphone apps to monitor people's health and alert other people if they've come in contact with someone infected. These are intrusive – some would argue they infringe on personal privacy. Is this a price we're willing to pay for some assurance in public? Tough questions, and I have no definite answer. But let's remember, this is a war, just one against non-human enemies.

Mr. Trump has claimed he is a wartime president. If he truly believes that the situation today is akin to total war, like World War II certainly was, then he needs to approach these twin crises like Franklin Roosevelt did. FDR mobilized every aspect of American life in the interest of achieving victory over the Axis powers. We need to think of the situation today in those terms but remembering that this is a two-front war. It isn't a victory if we reopen businesses and lose 200,000 people to COVID-19. And it isn't a victory if we're able to subdue the spread of the virus and leave a third of our people out of work and thousands of businesses gone. It can't be either-or.

It's a difficult tightrope to walk, but walk it we must.

Goodbye, My Friends

Mortality has a way of creeping up on us, and it has hit me hard this month. I lost two friends I'd known since childhood, both gone too soon. I'd known both of these fellows since I was no more than 5 or 6 years old. One went to county schools and the other city schools with me, but we were all at Lexington High School together. One was in my class, one a year behind.

I confess that I did not stay in as close touch as I could have, though one lived here and the other not that far away south of Roanoke. Both of these men worked in fields that have



a big impact on the people that they interacted with on a professional level. They were respected and, indeed, loved by the people that they helped over the span of their respective careers. That's a legacy any of us would want to leave behind once we're gone.

Since both of these men were about my age, that hit me kind of hard. I know that, while there are things that we can do to mitigate the illnesses, accidents and other factors that can shorten our lives, sometimes things just happen. And I don't know whether anything could have made a difference for my friends. I do know, however, that there are preventive measures that can make a difference for people who may be subject to the conditions that they died of.

The first friend died of colon cancer, after initial treatment and a period of remission, followed by a re-occurrence of the disease. He was 65 years old.

According to the American Cancer Society, excluding skin cancers, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer diagnosed in both men and women in the United States, with roughly 150,000 new cases per year. The five-year survival rate for colorectal cancer has been improving over the past 20 years. Today, about two-thirds of patients survive for five years or more. Obviously, the earlier the cancer is diagnosed, the better the survival chances.

For people of average risk of colorectal cancer, the ACS recommends that screening begin at age 45. This can be by colonoscopy or several less invasive but more frequent tests. Because younger people are developing the disease, the recommended age for first tests has dropped from 50 years old. Those with no abnormalities found at the first colonoscopy may go 10 years before a repeat. Studies have shown that being overweight and inactive can be a risk factor for developing

colorectal cancer. Diet may have some impact but the studies are somewhat conflicting. For more information, go to the ACS's website at cancer.org.

My friend had a colonoscopy in his early 50s. He was advised to get another within five years. He didn't. I know that he was generally healthy, not overweight and was physically active.

My other friend died by suicide. Even in today's enlightened times, talking about suicide is hard to do. Over 48,000 people died by suicide in the United States in 2018; it is the 10th leading cause of death overall. Suicide is complicated and tragic, but it is often preventable.

Knowing the warning signs for suicide and how to get help can help save lives. Some of those signs are talking about feeling empty, hopeless, or having no reason to live, talking about great guilt or shame, talking about feeling trapped or feeling that there are no solutions, talking about being a burden to others,

using alcohol or drugs more often, acting anxious or agitated, withdrawing from family and friends, displaying extreme mood swings, suddenly changing from very sad to very calm or happy, giving away important possessions and saying goodbye to friends and family, among others. The National Institute of Mental Health's website has a lot more information about the signs at [nimh.nih.gov](https://www.nimh.nih.gov).

An organization called the QPR Institute offers online and in-person training to help anyone learn to save a life from suicide. QPR stands for question, persuade, and refer. The organization equates training in suicide prevention with learning CPR or the Heimlich maneuver to help save someone in need. You can learn more by going to [qprinstitute.com](https://www.qprinstitute.com).

Nothing will bring back the friends and loved ones we've lost, but perhaps knowing more about the resources available might help you or someone you love.

Are You A Stoic?

I was listening to an interesting discussion on the radio the other day on the topic of Stoicism – the philosophy with a capital “S” rather than the more common usage with a lower case “s,” which is associated with self-denial and suffering. I was not aware of what these ancient thinkers and writers truly believed, and how modern thinkers have expanded upon their ideas. But I found the concepts to be quite interesting, and applicable to the world today.

I’m not one to subscribe to a particular philosophy of life. But what this guest on the radio show talked about intrigued me. So, I did some research on the nature of Stoicism,



both from the ancients to the thinkers of today.

The Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius identified four cardinal virtues of Stoicism, those being courage, temperance, justice and wisdom. The modern Stoic movement attempts to use these qualities to guide their approach to the real world of today. They espouse differentiating between the things over which we have control and those which we do not. They believe that we should concentrate on the former and not sweat the stuff which we can not change.

Interestingly, Stoic philosophy influenced the development of modern cognitive psychotherapy. A quote from Epictetus has been used in the initial sessions of a form of psychotherapy, which says, “It’s not the events that upset us, but our judgments about the events.”

The concept of separating the things over which we have control from those which we do not seems to go to the root of a lot of people’s dissatisfaction today. Many folks get

worked up about the frustrations of everyday life. They rage at traffic, they bemoan the fact that they are not wealthy, or that they made a decision earlier in life that was wrong for them. To a great extent, these are things that are beyond their control. The Stoics would argue that people should let those thoughts go. I suspect doctors would agree that focusing on these uncontrollable aspects of life contribute to high blood pressure, depression and other physical and mental illnesses.

Critics of Stoicism say that this process of separating the possible from the impossible results in a sense of resignation, of fatalism in people, who may decide that nothing they do makes any difference. I think that might be taking it a bit far. I think most of us, deep down, know what we can influence in our lives, and what we can not.

Many of the people who were great agents of change were influenced by the Stoics. George Washington, Frederick the Great and Theodore Roosevelt, among others, studied their writings. More recent

examples of those for who have credited Stoicism with a measure of their success include General James Mattis and Admiral James Stockdale, who survived seven years in captivity – four in solitary confinement – in North Vietnam. In his book, “Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot,” Stockdale attributes his survival to his knowledge and application of Stoic principals.

The ancient Stoics believed that their philosophy was grounded in an all-encompassing view of man’s interaction with and belonging to nature. Modern Stoic thinkers don’t embrace that, but do suggest that many of the principles – the four virtues, the embrace of the “art of the possible,” and others such as the keeping of a daily journal are important to living productive and rewarding lives. The website daily-stoic.com says to keep a journal that is more than just a recitation of the day’s activities; indeed a reflection on the day, on insights and wisdom received, and preparation for the day ahead.

Other Stoic principles involve seeing obstacles as opportunities, and of recognizing that all wealth, power and achievement is ephemeral. Stoics say that we should “meditate on our mortality,” not being morbidly obsessed with our death but remembering that it will eventually come, and appreciating even the small things in life that we enjoy while we have them.

I wonder if some of our folk philosophers, like Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain, if not directly influenced by the Stoics, instead expressed Stoic thought in the form of many of their common sense aphorisms. A lot of it sounds like what my parents and grandparents tried to impart to me growing up – though surprisingly, not the journaling part.

I don’t think a philosophy like Stoicism should be confused with being a religion, but there are parallels in terms of promoting virtuous behavior and in giving some direction to one’s life.

So, while I’m probably not a stoic, I might be a bit of a Stoic, and didn’t know it.