

This Can Be Our Finest Hour – But We Need All of You

By Gretchen Schmelzer

For the vast majority of people nationwide and worldwide, this virus is not about you. This is one of those times in life, in history, when your actions are about something bigger. They are about someone else. They are about something greater, a greater good that you may not ever witness. A person you will save who you will never meet. You may be healthy, and your kids may be healthy.

You parents may be healthy. Everyone around you seems fine. And all the things you planned and the 2020 spring you thought you were going to have has been completely undone. You have to work from home. Your conference is cancelled. Your semester is over. Your work is cancelled. It all seems fast, and out-of-proportion and disorienting. You look at each action and think—but it would be okay if I did that. It's not so big. We worked so hard. They would be so disappointed.

Your losses are real. Your disappointments are real. Your hardships are real. I don't mean to make light or to minimize the difficulty ahead for you, your family or community.

But this isn't like other illnesses and we don't get to act like it is. It's more contagious, it's more fatal—and most importantly, even if it can be managed. It can't be managed at a massive scale—anywhere. We need this thing to move slowly enough for our collective national and worldwide medical systems to hold the very ill so that all of the very ill can get taken care of. Because at this time of severe virus there are also all of the other things that require care. There is still cancer, there are still heart attacks, there are still car accidents, there are still complicated births. And we need our medical systems to be able to hold us. And we need to be responsible because our medical systems are made up of people and these amazing healthcare workers are a precious and limited resource. They will rise to this occasion. They will work to help you heal. They will work to save your mother or father or sister or baby. But in order for that to happen we have very important work to do. ALL OF US.

So what is our work? Yes, you need to wash your hands and stay home if you are sick. But the biggest work you can do is expand your heart and your mind to see yourself and see your family as part of a much bigger community that can have a massive—hugely massive—impact on the lives of other people. I remember the feeling of helplessness after 9/11 and after Hurricane Sandy. I remember how much people wanted to help. I remember how much generosity of spirit there was about wanting to give, wanting to be helpful, wanting to save lives. And many of you have had experiences since then—

whether it was a mass shooting, or the wildfires, or floods. There have been times you have looked on and wondered how you could help. And now we ALL have that chance.

You can help by canceling anything that requires a group gathering. You can help by not using the medical system unless it is urgent. You can help by staying home if you are sick. You can help by cooking or shopping or doing errands for a friend who needs to stay home. You can help by watching someone's kid if they need to cover for someone else at work. You can help by ordering take-out from your local restaurants. Eat the food yourself or find someone who needs it. You can help by offering to help bring someone's college student home or house out-of-town students if you have extra rooms. You can help by asking yourself, "What can I and my family do to help?" "What can we offer?" You can help by seeing yourself as part of something bigger than yourself.

When the Apollo 13 oxygen tank failed and the lunar module was in danger of not returning to earth, Gene Kranz, the lead flight director overheard people saying that this could be the worst disaster NASA had ever experienced—to which he is rumored to have responded, "With all due respect, I believe this is going to be our finest hour."

Imagine if we could make our response to this crisis our finest hour. Imagine if a year or two from now we looked back on this and told the stories of how we came together as a team in our community, in our state, in our nation and across the world. Your contribution to the finest hour may seem small, invisible, inconsequential—but every small act of 'not doing' what you were going to do, and 'doing' an act of kindness or support will add up exponentially. These acts can and will save lives. The Apollo 13 crew made it their finest hour by letting go of the word "I" and embracing the word "we." And that's the task required of us. It can only be our finest hour if we work together. You are all on the team. And we need all of you to shine in whatever way you can.