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 Arlington Street Church
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Flu

with profound thanks to John M. Barry, author of The Great Influenza

My maternal grandparents and great aunt were all sick with the flu. Their dormitories at Bates College were transformed into infirmaries. My great grandmother drove a horse-drawn carriage from her farm in Littleton to Lewiston – Massachusetts to Maine – to nurse them and their classmates back to health. My grandfather lost all his hair and it grew back into a thick, curly mop of dark curls. Among the most haunting of all the stories my grandfather shared with me is of the great influenza of 1918.

During the AIDS pandemic of the mid-1980s, three questions surfaced I wish I had known to ask my grandfather:

What happened?

Why?

What did we learn?

It has now been one hundred years since the Great Influenza. This anniversary and this particularly virulent flu season inspired me to research these questions. The answers – completely unexpected – are shocking, and well worth our reflection.

My first question: What happened?

In 1918, Haskell County, Kansas – located in the southwest corner of the state, near Oklahoma and Colorado – was hog country. It also lay below a major migratory flyway for seventeen species of birds. The theory is that those birds were carrying a virus that infected the hogs and, in turn, infected humans. A local physician there who had become a doctor before Louis Pasteur popularized the germ theory¹ alerted the U.S. Public Health Service about an especially virulent flu.

¹ 1860-1864

Several men from Haskell who had been exposed to that flu went to Camp Funston, the huge Army base in central Kansas, where men were being trained for combat in World War I. Within two weeks, 1,100 soldiers were admitted to the hospital; thousands more were confined to bed in their barracks. Infected soldiers carried the flu to other Army camps, and then overseas.

The pandemic lasted just 15 months, but it remains the deadliest disease outbreak in human history, killing as many as 100 million people worldwide – more in a year than AIDS-related illnesses have killed in 40 years; more than the bubonic plague killed in a century. 670,000 Americans died.

Although that flu originated here in the states, most of us know it as the Spanish flu. The reason points to the answer to my next question: Why? Specifically, why did it spread so furiously, and why was it so deadly?

The flu was raging here; in France; and in England, but all three countries were at war. When it swept through Spain, even the king got sick; only then did it begin to get attention from the media. But it's not that the United States media was solely focused on the war; it's because our media was censored.

At the urging of President Woodrow Wilson, Congress passed the Sedition Act, making it punishable with 20 years in prison to “urge, incite, or advocate any curtailment of production in this country of any thing ... necessary ... to the prosecution of the war.” In other words, keep showing up to your war machine job, keep infecting each other with this deadly virus ... and be cheerful: Government posters and ads urged people to report to the Justice Department anyone “who spreads pessimistic stories ... cries for peace, or belittles our effort to win the war.”

In August of 1918, a Navy intelligence report warned that “the disease now epidemic throughout Switzerland is ... known as the Black Plague, although it is [actually] Spanish [influenza].” The report was stamped “Secret and Confidential.”

Back at home, while the flu raged through communities, public health officials, in the name of keeping up morale, began to lie. Philadelphia had a

big Liberty Loan parade scheduled for September 28th. Doctors urged Wilmer Kruzen, the city's public health director to cancel it, knowing that hundreds of thousands of people would pile up along the route, crush against each other for a better view, and spread the disease. But Kruzen refused. Reporters agreed to write stories about the danger, but editors refused to run them. The largest parade in Philadelphia's history proceeded on schedule.

The incubation period of the flu is two to three days. Two days after the parade, the public health director conceded that the flu was now epidemic, but cautioned the city not to be "panic stricken over exaggerated reports." Young adults were the hardest hit.² Seven hundred and fifty nine people died ... in one day. Over the next six weeks in Philadelphia, more than 12,000 people died.

Agents of the government were just following orders, but their lies were killing people. People began to realize that their leaders were lying to them, and "with the truth buried, morale collapsed.... Society itself began to disintegrate."

In most disasters, we see the very best of humankind – strangers selflessly helping strangers. But without leadership, and without the truth, people only looked out for themselves. No one left their homes or spoke to one another. No one visited the sick, or brought food. No one was willing to take in the children of sick parents. Eventually, with schools and churches closed, all community life ceased.

Finally, in the spring of 1919, the most virulent form of the virus burned itself out. My final question: What did we learn?

The most important lesson has to do with the importance of knowing the truth; in knowledge is lifesaving power. To earn the public's trust, "you don't manage the truth; you tell the truth." And "though that idea is now incorporated into every [emergency] preparedness plan, ... its actual

² Young adults have the strongest immune systems. They attacked the virus with chemicals called cytokines and other microbe-fighting toxins. These "cytokine storms" damaged the patients' lung tissue, which subsequently bore lesions resembling those incurred from breathing poison gas. ~ John M. Barry, "How the Horrific 1918 Flu Spread Across America," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 11/17

implementation depends on the character and leadership of the people in charge when a crisis erupts.... Society is based on trust.”

As we well know, once you breach that trust – once leaders begin to offer “alternative facts” – people become alienated from authority. And “the worse things get, the more it’s everyone for themselves.”³

John M. Barry, author of *The Great Influenza* and the foremost historian of the flu pandemic, writes,

“.... Horror movies build [on] fear of the unknown, the uncertain threat that we cannot see and do not know and [from which we] can find no safe haven.... But in every horror movie, once the monster appears, terror condenses into the concrete and diminishes....

“There was terror afoot in 1918 – real terror. The randomness of death brought that terror home. So did its speed. And so did the fact that the healthiest and strongest [were] the most vulnerable.... The lies of officials and of the press never allowed the terror to condense into the concrete.... so [it] seeped into the society, [preventing people from helping each other].

“The fear, not the disease, threatened to break the society apart....

“... [The] lesson ... is that ... [those] in authority must retain the public’s trust. The way to do that is to distort nothing.... [They] must lessen the panic that can alienate [everyone].... Society cannot function if [everyone is for only themselves]. By definition, civilization cannot survive that.... Leadership must make whatever horror exists concrete. Only then will people be able to break it apart.”⁴

The Great Influenza pandemic should have been another “never again” moment in our history. It was not. We should be shocked – appalled – that our government broke trust by withholding information that could have saved lives. We are not. Given our current political climate, and given

³ John M. Barry, “How the Horrific 1918 Flu Spread Across America,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 11/17

⁴ John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza*, pp. 460-461. John is the historian and author who has told this story in its fullness; I commend his work and highly recommend this book.

that there is every possibility that we will be tested again, this is where I would amend John Barry's conclusions: If we can't count on authorities to tell the truth, we're going to have to seek it and find it and speak it ourselves.

AIDS tested us. Once again, the government failed us. It was first identified in 1981, but it took Ronald Reagan four years to mention it publicly. In that time, thousands of young, vibrant people died. It was abundantly clear that the government was not going to help, but many of us rose to the crisis and took it all into our own hands. In 1987, the Silence=Death Project created their iconic poster and wheatpasted it all over New York City. In breaking our silence, we discovered so much power in communities living with AIDS – the power in speaking up, finding each other, sharing knowledge about treatments and caregiving, lobbying for research, marching and protesting for attention and action from the government.

And we took care of each other. Because we didn't know how the virus was spreading, many of us believed we were risking our lives in caring for people with AIDS. This is the place of the moral compass in a crisis: We took care of each other because it was the right thing to do. How else could you live with yourself? And in caring for one another, we knew the very best of ourselves, and the very best of life ... which is love.

Beloved spiritual companions,

At this grim anniversary,
 In this grim political climate,
 Let us continue to ask,
 What happened?
 Why?
 What did we learn?

It is fear, not disease,
 that threatens civilization.

May the seek and find and speak
 the truth.
 In knowledge is lifesaving power.

In caring for one another

is life – the very best of life.
Always – always –
Let us love one another well.