

The practical wisdom that comes from a pandemic

The question “what are we for?” takes on new meaning these days.

by [Debra Dean Murphy](#) in the [August 12, 2020](#) issue



(Photo by Darius Bashar on Unsplash)

When the small liberal arts college where I teach locked down in mid-March due to COVID-19, we found ourselves, as in schools everywhere from kindergartens to the Ivy League, adjusting on the fly to conditions we'd barely imagined a week or so before. The highs and lows, the comedy (and tragedy) of errors, and a few surprising successes have been chronicled across disciplines and in educational settings everywhere, resulting in a kind of sobering solidarity about what was possible, what was disastrous, and what remains utterly unknown. This has been true for other organizations as well, from churches to corporations.

Most colleges and universities have long-standing mottos associated with their emblems, usually rendered in Latin and meant to encapsulate their ethos. Many elite schools in the US, established during the ascendancy of American Protestantism, retain mottos that reflect a piety now mostly absent from their curricula and

common life. The scroll on the shield of Brown University, for instance, says *In Deo Speramus*, “In God we hope.” My own college’s motto is “Let there be light.”

After mottos came mission statements—still short but expansive enough to communicate something of a school’s self-understanding, and nowadays used routinely for branding and marketing. One of the ironies of higher education is that growing uniformity—imposed by government mandates and the popular belief that college is fundamentally career training—makes it difficult for schools to distinguish themselves as they compete for students from the same shrinking pool of applicants.

But the coronavirus pandemic has required schools (and churches and corporations) to consider their mission in ways that go beyond attracting and retaining newcomers. While other exigencies have forced self-reflection in the past, the crisis of COVID-19 has urgently pressed the question: What are we for?

When I teach Christian ethics, we spend some time talking about *phronesis*, one of the four cardinal virtues. Often translated as prudence or practical wisdom, it is the moral excellence of discernment in the everyday, of deciding what shape the good must take in a particular situation. If one seeks to live fully into their personhood—to fulfill their telos—practical wisdom is the virtue necessary for navigating the many possibilities of action in the moment. Likewise, if a community wants to thrive and endure, it must regularly reason together about what purpose it serves and what serves its purpose.

In recent months, most of us have been overwhelmed by the challenges of doing our jobs in new ways. Amid struggles and irritations, and as the passage of time has afforded some perspective, we have been forced—or invited—to discern what our real work is. Meeting my students in cyberspace sharpened my sense that difficult conversations are best engaged face to face, but it also revealed that shy or anxious students sometimes find their voice when participating from their own comfortable space. Many churchgoers have discovered that the impersonal character of online worship underscores the necessity of embodied connections, and so they have redoubled their efforts to check in on neighbors, practicing as safely as they can acts of generosity and care that have always been at the heart of Christian community. Such occasions to exercise practical wisdom help clarify what any community is for, in terms of both its purpose and what it cares about ultimately.

Practical wisdom, then, is essential to the everydayness of being in community, holding before us always the questions of who we are and where we are succeeding and failing to live fully into our identity. It is the art of making informed judgments about what needs to be done when those questions are answered honestly. And if practical wisdom becomes an organizing frame for a community's life together, when disruptions occur, forms of deliberation are already in place to help identify the issues and address them wisely. The uncertainty of COVID-19 and the likelihood of future pandemics make dealing prudently with such paradigm-shifting disruptions urgent.

So does the other major disruption of the spring and summer of 2020: the long-overdue reckoning with white supremacy and the violence it has sanctioned in communities and institutions of all kinds. In this case, practical wisdom is the moral skill of vision and attention—what Iris Murdoch described as casting a “just and loving gaze” on what is before us. Love here is not sentimental attachment but the desire and willingness to act for another's well-being. It is costly; it demands the dismantling of systems that have kept the powerful in place, their knees on the necks of the vulnerable and the demonized. This is where practical wisdom merges with the cardinal virtues of courage and justice. To see rightly in this moment requires acting justly and with courage.

If a college is what Craig Dykstra calls a “community of convictions,” then accurate moral vision requires a wholesale reevaluation of these convictions and the pedagogies that advance them. It demands the redress of harm that occurs in the curriculum and the community's life together. To attend to all of this is the work of love—practical wisdom goes hand in hand with *caritas*. For too long, too many of us have been content to remain in the darkness of our ignorance, complicity, and unacknowledged power, while others have been grievously wronged. Now we must say, *let there be light*.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “What are we for?”