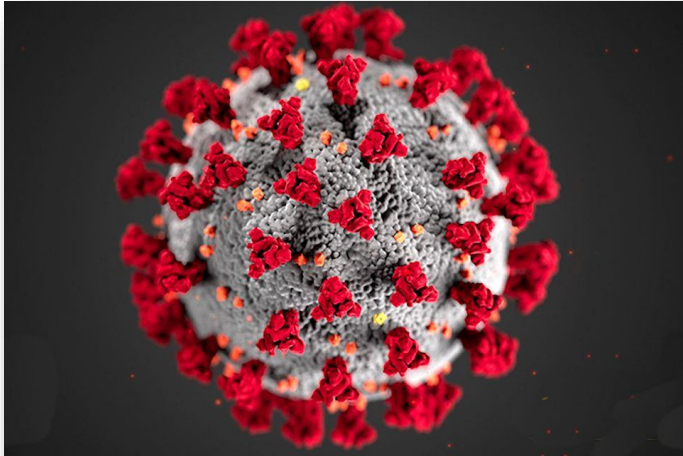


CONCERN FOR THE PRE-BORN - BUT NOT THE PRE-DEAD



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By David Klement

Now I know what it feels like to be a marginalized American.

I am not black, Asian, Hispanic, female, LGBTQ or physically disabled. I am in fact a white male with a post-graduate degree.

So what makes me think I can identify with those in the above racial, ethnic, gender or sociological groups to whom marginalization – or worse – is a fact of life?

I am old.

And in the Covid-19 hurry-up-and-reopen environment, that defines me as expendable. At least that is the conclusion I take from the remarks of some leaders of the rush to end the lockdown on America's economy, ordered six weeks ago to prevent potential exposure to the virus that nevertheless has cost the lives of 63,000-plus Americans and more than 200,000 globally.

The talk began early in the crisis when Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick said in an interview on Fox News with Tucker Carlson in late March, "Let's get back to living." With the virus still raging and older people more at risk of dying if they become infected, the 70-year-old Patrick told Carlson, "If that's the exchange, I'm all in." Somewhat less subtle was the sign that a woman demonstrating outside the Tennessee capitol for reopening the state's economy on April 20 stating, "Sacrifice the weak, reopen [Tennessee]."

A city planning commissioner in Antioch, Calif., was even more blunt. "In my opinion we need to adapt a Herd Mentality. A herd gathers its ranks, it allows the sick, the old, the injured to meet its natural course in nature," Ken Turnage II wrote in a Facebook

post. Turnage added that “homeless and other people who just defile themselves by either choice or mental issues” should also be allowed to die as this “would fix what is a significant burden on our Society and resources that can be used.”

The post was widely condemned and Turnage was quickly removed from office by the Antioch City Council, even as he protested that he was not expressing any bias toward the old, sick or homeless but merely his belief in “ecological balance.”

Rallies against state governors’ mandatory shutdown orders, egged on by President Trump, have become commonplace all over the country. Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., said on Fox News April 30 that if the shutdown doesn’t end soon, people will simply stop complying with the stay-at-home orders, consequences be damned. “At least, the people in my state [Louisiana], the people are going to stop complying,” Kennedy told Sean Hannity. “My governor has said that he’s not going to make a decision until May 15th. I respect that, but he hasn’t been able to convince the people of Louisiana.”

But it was left to the governor of Colorado, Jared Polis, a Democrat, to lay out the life-vs-economy tradeoff in stark terms. As reported by John Harris on POLITICO, CNN’s Jake Tapper asked Polis if he worried that a premature move to reopen could “cost your constituents their lives.” Polis’ carefully-worded answer would win first prize in an obfuscation contest. Considering that the pandemic might last several months, the governor said he is looking for a path forward in “an ongoing, sustainable way,” one that takes into account citizens’ interests “psychologically, economically and from a health perspective,” Harris reported.

Harris’ own translation of that reply: “Yes, some people are going to die of Covid-19 who wouldn’t if I keep a full lockdown in pace. I hope not too many or too fast. But keeping the risk of death as low as possible imposes other costs that are too high, and my job is to balance competing goals.”

So, I guess I know where I stand. Fully 80 percent of Covid-19 deaths have been among people age 60 or older. At age 80, I am not liking my odds of surviving to Thanksgiving if the rush to reopen without massive testing accelerates. The exposure rate among younger people will almost certainly surge, raising my risk of picking up the virus by a random touch or breath.

Indeed, the pandemic is tearing away the veil of widespread ageism in America. I personally have experienced the bias against older employees in the labor market. I see the elderly depicted as senile dependents in countless TV commercials for pharmaceutical products. Then there are the young people wandering through the

grocery store unmasked and seemingly oblivious to the social distancing recommendations -- invulnerable and immortal – until they're not, taking me with them.

Look, I get it about younger generations needing to get back to work to earn money for rent, mortgages, food, health insurance and all of the basics of life. It wasn't that long ago that I was a member of that workforce. I only retired one year ago. Members of my own family are in this situation. But, do we really need to sacrifice a generation to get to that point? Is there no other solution to the loss of earning power among the working force than to throw their elders on the pyre? If we had true leaders in this crisis, I believe we would find a way.

Age discrimination of this scale and visibility is new, but ageism is not. In an article in the May 1 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, Laura Newberry quoted a leading geriatric physician as saying, "The stigma [against elders] is growing." Dilip Jeste, who works at the UC San Diego Center for Healthy Aging, told Newberry, "Anytime you mention the virus and risk, immediately people think of older adults. They think of the people more likely to be hospitalized, to take up beds in the ICU."

I have no doubt that the ranks of the open-it-up protesters are filled with pro-life advocates, the so-called evangelical Christians who have insisted for nearly five decades that all life is precious, from the moment of conception. Well, at least that goes for the pre-born; once babies come into this world, the pro-life zealots don't appear so anxious to assist the unemployed, unwed teen mothers with feeding and housing the babies, who will grow up in poverty, with all its concomitant disadvantages dooming them to the same fate?

This concern for the pre-born and lack of concern for the pre-dead – that is, the elderly like me who are hogging all the ICU beds and ventilators instead of just dying – sets up an interesting case of moral relativism. Yes, there's that term which conservatives have thrown at pro-choice advocates in the abortion wars. You're all for saving lives, for avoiding wars, for curing disease in far-flung Third World nations, they said. But what about the fetuses who would grow up to be who knows what – president of the United States – if given a chance at life?

So I throw it back at you: What about the grandparents of your or my children who could be exposed to coronavirus and die prematurely? What about the 60- or 70-somethings still in the prime of their life who – judging by the age of the 2020 presidential candidates – could still become president? Is it OK to abandon them on the equivalent of ice floes, as the Inuits reportedly did to their elders in centuries past?

Have we not progressed beyond such passionless regard for our elders?

Or, to put it in totally personal terms: What about me?

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