# COVID READING

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I thought re-reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus would be a perfect fit for our quarantine times. It wasn't.

I say "re-reading" because I first encountered the book at the age of 15 while attending an all-boy's Catholic high school run by the Christian Brothers. I had had a conventional Catholic upbringing for a boy in the early 1960s: first confession, first communion, confirmation, altar boy (speaking the Mass in Latin)—the usual sequencing.

The folks on my father's side were Portuguese Catholics, and every once in a while, when our Air Force family was stationed near the Atlantic coast of Connecticut, we'd make our way to the festa, a yearly celebration in honor of Mary. Her statue would be shoulder-carried by rough-edged fisherman from the church to the festival hall (one year, I did my part in the sacred transportation, bearing Mary's weight while dressed in a suit that gave me a penitential sweat over the mile-long course to the hall).

At the hall, a barnlike building with a high reach and large forgiving windows that, when opened, created a soothing cross-ventilation no matter how hot it got outside, old Portuguese women, dressed in black wearing heavy orthopedic shoes, their hair pulled back and up and netted, cooked the food we would eat in enormous pots settled on a line of gas burners, while others readied the plates and glasses and did manifold preparatory miracles. Soon there would be the communal meal, then bingo and raffles and music and dancing and prayers, then the return of the statue to the church (this time by truck).

In memory, this all felt good: warm, loving, simple, solidifying, buoyed by the sensory recall of the food smells and the glints of light off the colored cellophane that enwrapped the raffled-off fruit baskets and the rogues' gallery of old women seated along one long wall on slatted wooden folding chairs with small glasses of sherry in their hands chattering up the air.

So, yes, a conventional still-pre-Vatican middleclass Catholic piety for a Catholic child, easy to wear, easy to invoke, unmarked at the moment by the doubts and changes taking place in Italy and South America.

Freshman religion class at the all-boy's high school, with Father John (name changed) in the lead. What we newbies didn't know was that Father John was having a crisis of faith about his calling, and he let some of that slip into the curriculum he served to us, assigning, for a reason I'm sure must have made sense to him at the time, *The Plague* by Albert Camus.

But, oh what a gift, at least to me—I have no recollection of what anyone else in class took away from the assignment. Camus' novel is about what it takes, morally and socially, to fight an implacable foe without the comfort of knowing that everyone's suffering, both of the infected and the collateral others who must share in their afflictions, has purpose and meaning.

Religious faith does abide in the novel through the character of Father Paneloux, but even he can only sustain his faith by accepting without critical engagement or the balm of skepticism the notion that what God does is good regardless of how it appears to us. All he can offer his flock is an all-or-nothing proposition: either accept the faith or be damned because you do not accept wholly and without question.

Camus' sympathies are clearly with Dr. Bernard Rieux, who coordinates the medical resistance to the disease, and Jean Tarrou, a man who feels "plague-stricken" by the propensity of humans to kill each other and vows to always take the victim's side in life's battles. They do what they do to save whom they can save without any guarantee that what they do will, in fact, accomplish anything good at all. They aim to become Camus' idea of a saint: a battered, weary warrior against all that inflicts suffering on their fellow humans, committed to doing one's job in the face of adversity, their recompense knowing that they held to as true a course of action as they could discern out of the chaos of their living.

Here's how Camus states it in the novel's penultimate paragraph, as Rieux explains why he kept the chronicle of the plague upon which the novel is based:

> None the less, he knew that that tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and

> what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

For the 15-year-old, this simple affirmation of a life of modesty and commitment uncompensated by any divine guarantees cleansed away the baroque ornamentation that Catholic theology had glued to the edifice of my spirit. No more the wrestling with the paradox of a loving god permitting the death of children; better to go out and do what one can to save the children without having to justify it by torturous beliefs in the unbelievable. As Rieux says throughout the book, the important thing is to know one's job and get down to doing it.

As we make our way through whatever this pandemic is, we do not face the existential shriving of the soul that the citizens of Oran faced in their isolation, anger, fear, separation, abandonment, and purposeless suffering. This language and this sensibility about life is simply not the language of our times.

There are some superficial analogues, such as the "sainthood" of Rieux and Tarrou with the hero-naming of the medical people handling the crisis, the hubris of officials in both Oran and Washington, D.C., believing that their politics and bromides would immunize them from the coming decimation, or the clueless platitudinizing that "we are all in this together" when plainly we are not.

But Camus' book can't do anything to teach us about the mysteries and knots of our current humanity because American politics and culture have made us deaf to what Camus has to say about proper conduct and the modesty needed to live a moral life that buffers suffering and resists oppression.

Our American ears are too loud with self-absorption and racial hatreds and social media bombast to hear a voice counseling us "to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done." Reducing damage and minimizing cruelty seem not to be our goals as we push to "open our society" while knowing full well that those who are weak, aged and marginalized will pay the price for our faux liberation.

For my own part, meeting up with this old friend did me good, bringing me back to a breakpoint in my life when intellectual ferment led to an effervescent change in heart

and life-direction, a moment too-little repeated in life and still much-hungered for. Did re-reading help me find my way through our pandemic? Marching forward with a revived friendship to a new breakpoint is about the only thing I can imagine that justifies what we're going through. If we're not doing that, if our only hope is to get to back to normal, then we will be like the citizens of Oran before the fall of the plague: "Our townsfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves; in other words they were humanists; they disbelieved in pestilences….They forgot to be modest, that was all, and thought that everything still was possible for them; which presupposed that pestilences were impossible….They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences."