

## DIALOGUE IN THE TIME OF CORONA

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Episode: Global Dialogue versus Global Pandemic

It's far too easy to take an event like the COVID-19 pandemic personally. By this I mean, it's tempting to focus on how it is affecting my life and the lives of those closest to me, without stopping to think of others. And when we do think of others, it's often those with whom we are connected professionally or geographically. In other words, when we cut off from each other, the world tends to shrink down to the personal and the local; or in the news broadcasts, the regional and national.

But in truth, the pandemic of 2020 is profoundly global. It is having similar effects all over the world, and life in the hot spots of Europe or Asia or Africa are similar to life in your hometown, if not actually worse.

According to the Global Health Policy COVID-19 Coronavirus Tracker, as of May 1st, there are 2,971,624 confirmed cases worldwide and 206,544 confirmed deaths. And just as the pandemic itself is global in its impact, so is the economic fallout from the pandemic. Neither the virus nor the risk of financial meltdown recognizes political borders. They leap over walls and skip across timelines.

As a result, our relatives, our friends, our colleagues from across the world—indeed, the human family in the largest possible sense of the word—are all suffering the same sense of isolation and threat that you are and I am. Ironically, even though we are more alone than ever, we are *not alone* in our anxiety and alienation.

For that reason, I believe that the only true response to the *global* threat to the human community is a renewed sense of *global* discourse—the practice of dialogue

stretching across borders, across oceans, across continents. To that end, I've been communicating with fellow educators across the world, all of whom have one thing in common. They understand, practice, and value dialogue. The art and craft of conversation ... with the ultimate goal of understanding each other and the ideas under discussion.

The first person I'd like to tell you about is Virginia Montini, a philosophy teacher in Cordoba, Argentina. Virginia emailed me after my first podcast a week ago to say just how much she identified with my call for a renewed focus on the value of conversation. She wrote about her own students and how "the details and integral aspects of face to face dialogue are so rich that virtuality somehow falls short. But also, it was gratifying to give students a 'time and place' to share what they are experiencing, to reflect upon what is going on in the world and in their own lives, to value the personal encounter in this screen-dominated times." So Virginia continues to facilitate student dialogue virtually even as she longs for a return to face-to-face discourse.

I think also of my dear friend, Ann Pihlgren, gifted Paideia teacher, educational consultant, and member of the Board of Directors of the National Paideia Center. Ann is based in Sweden and Spain and has carried the gift of dialogue into countless schools in Europe and the Middle East. She is sheltering with her husband, Kjell, in their apartment in Altea, Spain, where she continues to work on materials for teachers while in physical isolation. Ann not only embodies the values of international dialogue, she practices it at every opportunity, working for quality schooling in multiple countries.

I correspond with my colleague, Shameen Syad, on "lockdown" with her family in Creetown, a small village in Southwest Scotland. Last year, Shameen visited the United

Stated to study Paideia Schools in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arizona. She took what she learned back to her own school and the larger network of her teacher union to “spread the Paideia love,” meaning the love of conversation. Her next teaching and learning journey will take her to Palestine, where she will work with colleagues there who are also interested in bringing the culture of conversation into their classrooms.

My heart also goes out to my longtime friend and colleague, Pelusa Orellana, professor at the Universidad de los Andes and Paideia activist and educator. Earlier in the year, Pelusa reported that the Chilean National Agency for the Quality of Education is implementing a "contingency kit" for schools to provide teachers with discussion tools to help them talk with students about social unrest and discuss ways to reach peace, forgiveness and a positive outlook for the future. These kits contain Paideia Seminar lessons that Pelusa helped create. Now, Pelusa and her family are sheltering at home in Santiago, struggling like the rest of us to deal with the challenges of life in the time of Corona.

Last year, I met Leonidas Liambeys, a documentary film consultant and social studies teacher from Athens, when he was part of a film crew taping Socratic Seminars in U. S. classrooms. Leonidas and I continue to discuss how sheltering at home affects different students differently and why some students find it all but impossible to participate in “virtual” conversations. They need the physical presence of their friends to truly open up and engage. Like the rest of the educators in this podcast, he hopes that life after the pandemic will give them that opportunity—the opportunity to learn through face-to-face conversation.

In each case, my friends and colleagues—in Argentina, Sweden, Spain, Scotland, Chile, and Greece—are facing the same challenges as you or I. They are struggling to imagine a world after the pandemic, in which dialogue across political and economic boundaries becomes an integral part of the new normal. All these citizens of the world are educators, teachers who believe in the power of the word truly spoken ... and truly heard.

I join with them in imagining what we may all learn from this pandemic. And rather than letting the world grow progressively narrower and more claustrophobic, let us dedicate ourselves to a worldwide sense of community ... a truly global conversation.

**Let's talk about it...**