

A Reflection on Lawn Mowing during the Corona Crisis

Dries Deweer (Tilburg University)

I am writing you on day 16 of the Belgian stay-at-home order. Today, I was supposed to deliver the keynote lecture at Caritas Europa's Spring Academy in Ghent. It goes without saying that the event is not taking place. On the bright side, now I have some extra time to reflect on what is happening to the world. In that regard, I noticed that many of my neighbours use their imposed time at home to mow their lawn. Given the fact that we still have night frost in Belgium, that is a strange thing to do. Nevertheless, I can understand the urge. What else is there to do in isolation?

Voltaire's *Candide*

The situation reminds me of *Candide's* conclusion in Voltaire's famous story of the same name: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin* (We must cultivate our garden). The great French Enlightenment philosopher wrote *Candide, ou l'optimisme* (1759) as a satirical fairy-tale. The main character travels the world, going from one disaster to another tragedy. *Candide* gets entangled in civil war, which he flees to end up in the middle of an earthquake. Afterwards, he is subject to religious persecution, which forces him to find refuge overseas, where he falls prey to a tribe of cannibals. Poor *Candide* is continuously confronted with the whims of nature and the filth of humankind. Current events seem befitting of *Candide's* world, with all kinds of wars, earthquakes, and – most prominently – the pandemic that shocks the globe.

Candide came to the conclusion that we better cultivate our garden. That statement is open to interpretation. An obvious construal seems the following: Do not try to understand the world, let alone change the world. Just make a cosy little place for your own. "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*" would then be the expression of the temptation of cocooning. In the context of the dreadful events the world is facing, it is indeed very tempting to close ourselves off from the world, not only physically –which we are supposed to do – but also mentally. We can try to remain indifferent to the suffering. We can think that it will not affect us and that whatever we can do to help will never make any significant difference.

Perhaps it has never been so easy to avoid the face of the Other. All of us who are not medical professionals probably have never had so many excuses for not hearing an appeal to responsibility. The challenge upon us is to resist the temptation to retreat into our proverbial garden. It is not because we choose to ignore something that it ceases to exist. That counts for the misery in the world, but also for the voice of our conscience.

However, the interpretation of *Candide's* words as an appeal to cocoon does not do justice to Voltaire. Instead of this superficial reading, we need to interpret the cultivation of our garden in a more symbolical way. The emphasis is, then, not on self-retreat, but rather on self-development. The point Voltaire wanted to make is that great philosophical and theological theories on the meaning of life and suffering are not particularly helpful. His conclusion is that the only valuable answer to human suffering is to be found in active commitment for progress, starting in your own neighbourhood, in solidarity with the world.

Cultivating the Garden of Eden

Voltaire's humanism argues unequivocally not to close our eyes for people's suffering. It is a duty of humanity to consider what we can do, as citizens, as consumers, as volunteers, as donors, or in any

other role one can think of. The corona crisis challenges us to continue living on the conviction – the stubborn hope if need be – that every little bit counts. Only concrete commitment for health, peace and wellbeing makes us stay on top of cynicism and despair. Christian humanism has a compass to add to this wisdom. The Gospel calls on us to take special care of the weakest: ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’ (Mt 25, 40).

Today, this not only means that we have to protect the sick and elderly, the people who are most vulnerable to the virus itself. We are also called upon to take care of the people who are most vulnerable to the measures to contain the virus. A stay-at-home order is a cynical demand regarding the homeless. Social distancing means solitary confinement for the digitally deprived. Distance education amounts to rising poverty transmission. These are mere examples of the less prominent victims of the coronavirus.

The Christian personalist vocation is essentially about being constantly on the lookout for the people who we are most likely to overlook. Dire circumstances make this call sound more silent, but more penetrating for that matter. In dark times it makes all the more sense to be the light of the world. So my neighbours are right after all, there is no better time to cultivate our Garden of Eden.