

“I wish the ring had never come to me”

a reflection

Telling stories, be they accounts of actual events or a telling through fiction, can be a powerful way of exploring the things in life that trouble us deeply as well as the things in life we hold most dear. In the Lord of the Rings* trilogy, J.R.R. Tolkien explored the terrors of World War I in the context of his own worldview and spirituality.

In an exchange between Frodo Baggins and Gandalf the Grey, Frodo said, “I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.” At this point in the story of the Fellowship of the Ring, Frodo was beginning to realize, in a very real and personal way, the enormity of the task in front of him. When he stepped up to become the ring bearer, he knew the road ahead would be terrible. At this later point in the story, he had begun to actually feel this terror.

Those who choose a vocation in healthcare (or does it, rather, choose us? I think perhaps is it a bit of both) enter a vocation of perpetual uncertainty. They want to fix things but realize there is very little that can ever be fixed. Instead, what they can offer is help in the hope that the help they give will actually help.

Another uncertainty in healthcare is that it is risky to encounter people who have been thrust to the margins of their lives. In healthcare we typically encounter people at their most broken; physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. And in the encounter, we too are changed, mentally and emotionally, yes, and sometimes even physically and spiritually. And especially in times of worldwide systemic crisis the currents that bring both risk and change are very strong making them difficult to manage much less dismiss. We experience it and find ourselves overwhelmed, wishing this had not come to us. Yet it has.

What was Gandalf’s response to Frodo’s wish that this had not come? “So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decided is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

A part of “living to see such times” is that we are somehow forced to choose how to respond. It is easy to become paralyzed into not responding, yet the very act of not responding becomes a choice with very real consequences. The paralysis makes sense, though. Decision-making in times of crisis has very real long-term effects and there is a deep desire to have as complete information so as to make the right decision. Will it work out the way I want? Will I survive the effects of this choice mentally, spiritually, physically? Yet in most crises, healthcare or otherwise, decisions usually must be made in an environment of uncertainty.

But even in the persistent clouds of uncertainty and ever-changing knowledge decisions continue being made. Providers across disciplines who see someone scared and suffering, stand up and walk (sometime run) toward the fear and suffering instead of away from it. I see the apprehension in their eyes that they refuse to reveal to those in their care. I see them draw

strength and resolve from each other, supporting each other in the face of the uncertainties and apprehensions.

“There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo,” said Gandalf, “besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the ring. In which case, you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.”

Sometimes I am able to set aside the enormity of this pandemic, what it is capable of doing, and how ill-prepared for it we seem to be. In those moments I am able to see that we are all truly in this together. I am able to see a deep compassion in the eyes and actions of another. I am able to see relentless determination. I am able to see a genuine care of each other and a common purpose. And I am able to hope.

Rev. Kevin Adams, MDiv, PhD, BCC
Staff Chaplain, UVA Health
April 7, 2020

*Quotations from The Lord of the Rings, the Fellowship of the Ring (movie), 2001.