



Quarantining While Vulnerable: An Intersectional Perspective on Race, Health, and Faith During a Global Pandemic

By Tina M. Harris

I do not remember the exact moment when the magnitude of the pandemic overtook me. The moments are numerous and quite draining, scary even. Was it a feverish text thread with African American girlfriends/colleagues about making our own hand sanitizer? When my students asked my thoughts about whether we were moving online? Or maybe it was when I made the decision to delay yet another impending surgery to relieve 12 years of chronic foot pain until further notice? I vacillate between identities while making sense of this ever-evolving world. I am reminded on a daily, hourly, basis of the magnitude of the pandemic and what it means to me as a Black, single, professional, cisgender Christian woman. I am devising ways to minimize my anxieties and fears in order to have a sense of normalcy and peace. Thankfully, my faith in God gets me through. I remind myself that “this, too, shall pass.”

The seriousness of COVID-19 hit me in mid-March while grocery shopping before the world shut down. I was exchanging texts with one of my best friends who was in Georgia and very concerned about me. I was living in a new city by myself, and

this invisible monster was invading our worlds. She sternly told me to get home ASAP, to protect myself. I understood the urgency since the stores were bustling and food was flying off the shelves. The gravity of it all hit a few days later while listening to the Louisiana governor's press conference. I sat in disbelief by the enormity of everything. I was literally frozen as he reported on the rising deaths, particularly in New Orleans and East Baton Rouge, where I live. High blood pressure. High cholesterol. Diabetes. I didn't hear the rest because...the first two resonated for me. I have them. The numbers, warnings, and everything else was hitting a little too close to home. I imagine that's how my bestie felt, as a white female concerned about her best friend who was now quarantining while vulnerable. A majority of the victims were/are African American. I am African American. What did this mean for me? How can I protect myself from this invisible predator, seeking whomever it can devour? How can I help flatten the curve and remain sane? How is God going to help me, my family, friends, students, colleagues, and the entire world get through this — not just survive but thrive? My head was spinning. I felt that the world was caving in. I decided against the surgery after an African American female health tech at the doctor's office strongly advised me to delay the procedure. She "had my back." I felt a connection to the community in a way I had not since moving here eight months prior. I felt protected.

As a media, race, and sometimes health scholar, I am intrigued and concerned by coverage of the pandemic. I moderate my media consumption by choosing to watch local daily press conferences in order to remain informed. I engage with the news and

life as a “quarantiner” who is a part of a vulnerable and protected population. I use a critical lens and as a raced-gendered person thrust into an international crisis. I am overloaded with what precautions to take, recognizing symptoms, and understanding my risks while also managing my emotions – anxiety, fear, confusion, peace. My solace comes from my faith. I am sickened that “our” government blatantly disregards economically disadvantaged citizens and people of color. Essential workers are overwhelmingly low-wage earners and of color. They are required to “serve” the privileged while risking their lives for mere convenience. This is quite possibly why African Americans in particular are at greater risk of COVID-19: systemic racism and classism. My heart weeps.

This pandemic keeps me increasingly aware of how my intersecting identities contribute to my responses to the reality of COVID-19. As a scholar of color, I am now forced to change my temporarily stalled research initiative on racial healing. My concern is less about me and more about giving community members a platform to share storied accounts of the racist past and present of the south. I want to collaborate with them on creating interventions across racial lines that can dismantle racism, one relationship at a time. I am now somewhat redefining my purpose and professional identity as a scholar for racial justice.

This pandemic has sent me into an intellectual, mental, and spiritual tailspin that I never would have imagined. My identities are foregrounded, have ebbed and flowed,

as I have engaged in a sense-making process to navigate my physical and mental health. I am keenly aware of our realities that have become more acute as a result of this world crisis. *I see racism undergirding the systemic oppression that has become even more pronounced to those who refuse to see it. I see classism and more certain in my resolve that universal healthcare is a must, a human right to medical care for all. I also see the privileges I have regarding job security and being able to work from home that others do not. I also see that, as a sister, a daughter, a friend, my relationships have even more value than before. I have always appreciated and nurtured them; I see that I can do more. I see that, as a Christian, I must continue to show compassion for and grace towards others in spite of the rhetoric of the hypocrites claiming the same belief system while spewing pure hate. I choose to operate with the mindset of Jesus, that what I do “to the least of them,” I have done unto Him.*

My intersectionality vacillates with this new normal. I do not long for the old normal rife with various and layered iterations of systemic oppression. I vigilantly hope and pray for a new world where respect, humanity, decency, and connection thrive in spite of the odds that suggest otherwise.

