

Embracing life's givens with solidarity and compassion

Patty Fawkner SGS.

Nothing is certain in life except death and taxes, so Benjamin Franklin told us more than 200 years ago. This holds true, but there are other certainties in life, certainties which everyone in the world has become more acutely aware of during the COVID-19 pandemic and then George Floyd's murder and the subsequent mayhem in the US.

Some of life's certainties are explored in a book by psychotherapist [David Richo](#), *The Five Things We Cannot Change ... and the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*. The certainties, or "givens", as Richo calls them are:

- Everything changes and ends,
- Things do not always go according to plan,
- Life is not always fair,
- Pain is a part of life, and
- People are not loving and loyal all the time.

Our ongoing experience with the pandemic reinforces the notion that everything has changed, with our wiser self telling us that we won't be returning to life as we knew it. Plans we had made have quickly crumbled, challenging the myth that we are in control of our destiny. But we also know (or desperately hang on to the belief!) that this time of pandemic will end.

Despite government measures that were swiftly put in place in an attempt to contain the spread of the coronavirus and save jobs, not everything has been fair. Politicians have been caught out breaking the very social distancing laws they helped to implement. People in the arts, university staff and foreign workers are among the hundreds of thousands who are ineligible for the Federal Government's [JobKeeper](#) scheme.

This is a global health crisis – 'we are all in this together'. Everyone has experienced some form of pain, be it emotional, physical or psychological, including the pain of separation, illness, death, grief, loss, fear and anxiety.

The stresses on some individuals have tested love and loyalty. We see this, for instance, in the spike in reports of domestic violence.

Richo's five givens are real, they are part and parcel of everyone's life, not only in a time of pandemic. In a crisis, all five givens can be experienced simultaneously with excruciating intensity.

The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis while in police custody tragically validated each given. It took nine minutes of callous and unjust indifference to end his life, resulting in instant and acute suffering for family, community and, indeed, millions of black Americans who are told, yet again, that their lives don't really matter.

But in his book, is Richo correct in saying we find happiness in embracing the five givens? Might it not be a naïve, insensitive stretch to invite George Floyd's family to embrace them?

No. It occurs to me that embracing the givens of life is what Jesus meant with his uncompromising call for us to take up our cross and follow him. It's in the "how" of the embrace and the "how" of the taking up and following where life and wisdom lie, where possibility and hope lie.

George Floyd's life has ended. One senses that the US will not and should not return to business as usual. If the only response was to loot, riot or engage in egregious behaviour, George Floyd's death would be in vain.

His life and death will have meaning when we rightfully grieve and lament and call for an alternative response:

"In every case of police brutality the same thing has been happening," Terrence Floyd, brother of George, told a group of protesters. "Y'all protest, y'all destroy stuff ... Let's do this another way ... Let's switch it up. Do this peacefully," he said, encouraging the crowd to educate themselves and to vote.

In the face of searing unfairness and injustice, we set ourselves up for misery and frustration if our response is merely to rail, rant or hunt for a scapegoat. We embrace injustice by working for justice.

We embrace the painful realities of life by digging deeper for hope. "Every human act, any Christian act is an act of hope," says preacher and theologian, Walter Burghardt. A genuine human response to the painful givens of life – drought, bushfire, pandemic, murder – is an act of hope. Burghardt's words are prescient:

"We must live this moment – really live it, not just endure it – because this very moment, for all its imperfection and frustration, because of its imperfection and frustration, is pregnant with all sorts of possibilities, is pregnant with the future, is pregnant with love, is pregnant with Christ."

There is a resonance surrounding Richo's use of the word "given". A gift is given; indeed, the word "gift" comes from the old Germanic root for "to give". The realities of life are given, they are gifts, they are graces, if we embrace them, as Terrence Floyd pleads by doing "this another way" – not by revenge or reprisal but with solidarity and compassion.