



Music therapist Miranda Eden and chaplain Vern Bareman watch as Amy Brouwer and her family visit her father, Eugene Van Dyken, at Brookcrest Rehab and Life Center in Grandville on April 16. As the coronavirus pandemic spreads fear, loving acts are more important than ever. *MLive.com files*

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Love is essential in this time of fear

Kelly James Clark Senior Research Fellow, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

Note: We welcome back Kelly Clark, as we continue our series from the Kaufman Interfaith Institute staff. Kelly has led grant-funded international projects developing interfaith conferences and writing with contributions from Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars from over 10 countries, primarily in the Middle East. He is the author or editor of more than 20 books, including his recent book, "Stranger, Neighbors, Friends," that is the focus of two current online book group discussions.

When I was a little boy, in the early 1960s, my father directed The Community School at Lincoln Elementary School in Kalamazoo. Lincoln School was in Kalamazoo's predominantly black north side, literally just over the tracks from Kalamazoo's predominantly white south side. My brother and I spent a lot of time at Lincoln school — every weekday in the summer and, during the school year, at least one evening a week and most Saturdays. We played basketball, raced around, took swimming lessons and just hung out with Charlie and Leroy and Debbie and Jimmie and Earl and Curtis and countless others. It was a magical place to grow up.

While I was aware of the substantial white-black differences in housing and clothing, I wasn't aware that all U.S. cities were deeply segregated, ensuring a life of poverty for most black people. I do remember the north side's joyous celebration when the United States finally passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

Only later did I hear things that didn't coincide with the neighborhood and the people I knew. I heard that the north side was the ghetto and that black people were suited to poverty. I recall hearing a host of dehumanizing names, names that "justified" white people's historic mistreatment of black people.

I remember taking a Boy Scout camping trip to Northern Michigan and having to drive through the north side. Before we crossed the tracks into the north side, our driver, one of the dads, insisted that we roll up our windows and lock our doors and not look anyone in the eye because, he said, "you don't know what they might do." I recall his relief when we had safely passed through the threatening north side.

I remember thinking, "How can he say this? He doesn't know Charlie and Leroy and Debbie and Jimmie and Earl and Curtis, and countless others."

Charlie, by the way, would go on to earn his Ph.D. and become Magic Johnson's agent; Leroy a prominent educator in Grand Rapids; Jimmie a distinguished Navy veteran; Debbie a devoted teacher of young children; Earl a vice president at Upjohn; and Curtis a boxing coach who teaches impoverished children the meaning of discipline and success. And countless others.

But fear closed my driver's windows and doors, preventing him from seeing Charlie and Leroy and Debbie and Jimmie and Earl and Curtis and countless others as individual human beings like him, with hopes and dreams for a better future.

He saw Charlie and Leroy and Debbie and Jimmie and Earl and Curtis and countless others as just "one of them" — less than fully human, living in their self-imposed ghetto.

But he is not alone.

Fear, I've come to learn, does that to all of us. It not only makes us think the worst of others, it makes us blame and scapegoat others. And if we can blame "them" for crime, say, or drugs, then we can "justify" harming them.

Sadly, though it is four-plus decades since the Civil Rights Act, we continue to harm black people with racially biased police, juries, prisons and even vigilantes. As just one example: It took nearly two months and a great deal of public pressure for Georgia authorities to charge two white men with killing Ahmaud Arbery, a black jogger.

And fear is rearing its ugly head again. The coronavirus has created fear of isolation, of financial ruin, of destroying America and even of losing life itself.

As a result, fear is driving many of us, as we might expect, to blame and scapegoat others.

When bad things happen, we want to know why and we want to know who to blame. And, if it's not obvious, fear drives us into the nooks and crannies to find the why and the who.

And then to harm the perpetrator(s).

The problem is this — bad things are happening because of COVID-19 for reasons we don't know (or, more likely, for no reason).

There's no why and there's no who to blame. There's just COVID-19.

But there's little satisfaction in kicking a virus, just as there's little satisfaction in kicking a chair after one stubs one's toe on it.

And, just as we really want to know who put the darn chair in our toe's way (and punish them), we want to know who has put that darn virus in our way (and punish them).

But COVID-19 is not anyone's fault.

It's not the fault of the Chinese. While it did originate in



Kelly James Clark is a senior research fellow at the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

China, likely transferred from a bat, it could have originated anywhere. And we should no more blame the innocent person who first contracted the virus (or that person's country) than we should blame the U.S. for the 2009 swine flu (with up to half a million deaths worldwide) or the 1918 Spanish flu (with upwards of 50 million victims), both of which may have originated in the United States. And while we may dehumanize the Chinese as bat-eaters, we, after all, eat factory-farmed meat and raw oysters.

Blaming the Chinese has led, as one might expect, to harming Asian Americans (aka, Americans); hate crimes toward people of Asian descent are surging in the U.S. and around the world.

Likewise, it's not the fault of Republicans, Democrats, Anthony Fauci, immigrants, black people, Big Pharma, the Chinese military, the U.S. military, the deep state, Jews, Bill Gates, Mexicans, Muslims or the media.

It's just an inexplicable, purposeless, non-human mutation. But the fear of the inexplicable is driving us to blame and to harm and to divide — at precisely the time when we need to encourage and help and unite.

The Christian Scripture, which understands the deadly and powerful force of fear to inspire false beliefs and to inflict harm, says, "Perfect love casts out all fear."

But, since none of us is a saint, we are more liable to embrace its more natural opposite: "Fear casts out all love."

And then we're on to blame and harm and division.

Don't let fear win by inculcating in you false beliefs and inspiring in you the desire to inflict harm. And if fear and anger and hostility are festering inside you, again as is perfectly natural, tell your better self that you do not want to be that kind of person.

Choose, instead, love. You won't become instantly loving, of course. It never works that way. But you have to start somewhere. Start by avoiding those nooks and crannies that you know will incite your fear. Turn off the fear-mongers on the radio or television, don't click on that juicy headline, and avoid reading the posts and tweets of those who just confirm your fears.

Listen, instead, to inspiring music, talk (from a healthy distance) with people who look different from you, donate money to those who have none and read of love and courage and hope. There's enough to fear already — for our country and for our lives. Don't let false fear close the windows and lock the doors of your heart.

We need to come together now, when things seem the worst, so that we can work together later when things will really be the worst — when the virus has wreaked all of its havoc, when the last person dies and is buried alone, and with the economy in shambles. We need to cultivate love now, to overcome our fears, so we can face these new fears together and better.

And then let all-embracing love inspire us to work together with shared hopes and dreams for a better future.

interfaith@gvsu.edu