

# Solidarity – It’s in Your Hands!

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Last week, I spoke about the home cook who offers surprisingly simple approaches to cooking at home. His “shocking” secret was to simply cook in a way that you enjoy, is accessible and practical to you, and tastes good to you and those around you. In making soup, one way to do that is to simply put whatever you have around in water... and boil it. That was the secret... the “shocking” secret.

There are other “shockingly” simple techniques... practices, that can have surprisingly effective results.

Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis was a 19<sup>th</sup> century obstetrician who made a peculiar observation at the Viennese hospital that he supervised – in the hospital’s two maternity clinics, there were two drastically different mortality rates for childbed fever.

In the first clinic, medical students often oversaw births *after* carrying out autopsies on corpses – and it had a mortality rate around 10%, while in the second clinic, midwives would carry out births without any involvement with cadavers – childbed fever fatalities were around 1%.

After accounting for other factors, and finding other corroborating facts, he concluded that some kind of infection was being brought in through the handling of corpses. And since chlorinated lime water helped in eliminating the deathly smell, he suggested washing hands with a solution of chlorinated lime.

Deaths from childbed fever declined to nearly zero.

Dr. Semmelweis found that the most effective solution to saving lives was simple – [cleanliness](#).

He couldn't explain exactly why... he was still lacking a theoretical explanation – but the data was very clear. And its implementation was effective.

Semmelweis' observations, explanation, and method, were not easily accepted – despite the hard data that backed it up. The reasons are complicated, and have been attributed to psychological tendencies, as well as social, and political. There may have also been interpersonal disputes between Semmelweis and his colleagues – it's complicated. However, it is a matter of record that he was often mocked by some of his colleagues, some of whom took offence at the suggestion that they needed to wash their hands, despite their gentlemanly status.

My friends, we're at a time when we're faced with several trying weeks, due to a complex health emergency, that is further complicated by economic and political factors.

Along this difficult problem, we've have been empowered by a deceptively simple solution – [handwashing](#).

And now we have also been asked a similarly simple – yet sometimes more difficult – request: staying away from each other. This is not comfortable for many of us. We are social creatures that thrive on contact with others, our very worship practices are often based on meeting up, and for some of us, isolation may in fact put at risk our livelihoods – or those of people we know. And yet social distancing, along with handwashing are the most powerful tools we have in saving the lives of many of our neighbours, including members of our community.

That outcome is in our hands.

And while social distancing can have many difficult side-effects, the other tool we have – handwashing – requires very little of us beyond water, soap, and some intentionality.

Whatever your life situation allows, [handwashing is a disease-fighting superpower](#) that is entirely in your hands.

The power to stop COVID-19 is in your hands.

And it doesn't stop there. Because handwashing can prevent a whole diversity of diseases – including the common cold and the seasonal flu, as well as other common infections. For many of these, we don't even need the chlorinated lime solution proposed by Dr. Semmelweis – soap and water does just fine. It is a good practice to have – even during times that feel more normal.

[This power is in our hands.](#)

We are being called to use this power – not only for our personal sake – but for the sake of all who surround us... for what touches one affects us all. And even those of us for whom the odds seem favourable have a responsibility of solidarity to all who we may affect – near and far – and who may be much more vulnerable.

My friends, in being mindful to curbing the spread of disease – be it COVID-19 or any other easily transmissible virus – we are acting in solidarity with health providers in Canada and around the world, we are acting in solidarity with other essential personnel, like grocery store, and we are acting in solidarity with the most vulnerable among us.

In Solidarity, so may it be.

Amen

*Suggested hymns:*

[188 Come, Come, Whoever You Are](#) – *Sing this twice while washing hands!*

134 Our World Is One World

18 What Wondrous Love

[1002 Comfort Me](#)