

GENERATIONAL GOBBLEDYGOOK

During the present avalanche of coronavirus news, one of the most intriguing pieces I've read was a lengthy Wall Street Journal article written by a psychiatrist, Dr. Marc Agronin.

All of us think we're talking the same language, the good doctor posits, but, based on his careful observations during the COVID-19 panic, he says we're not. Different generations may spout the same words but intend totally different messages than others saying the same words.

To describe his findings, Agronin coined labels such as "fortyish" and "fiftyish" and "sixtyish" to identify the messages these generations intend to send when they talk about how we should respond to the virus threat. Same words, different content.

In my limited space here, I can't begin to recap everything he said on this virus-related topic. A brief look at what he hears from elderly folks, though, may illustrate his point. Although labeled as the generation most endangered by the virus, we in the gray hair/no hair gang tend to be the least afraid of it. Already we lived through the Great Depression and three major wars and polio and 9/11, and we survived. So we're not as easily panicked by universal fears as are younger folks who lack our experience. A trip to Walmart seems reasonable to us, but not to our grandkids. They hear "shelter-at-home" as a more stringent requirement than most seniors do.

Dr. Agronin gave examples of different generations using the same virus warnings to send different messages. Realizing that we're doing this may help the old and young in our families appreciate each other's concerns during this life-changing time. If we learn to hear what the varied generations actually mean, Agronin says, "we can better communicate our fears, needs, and strengths to one another." And that, he says, "can go a long way toward relieving so much of the intense stress and tension that we are all feeling in a time of lockdowns and illness."

I doubt that it surprises any of us to know that grandkids don't always understand what grandparents are trying to tell them. And vice versa. But until I was alerted to it by this psychiatrist, I had not factored the generational disparities into our efforts to communicate within our families. All of my life I've been aware that the Depression and the world wars changed the outlook and behavior of my parents (and their parents), but I had not stopped to analyze how my own experiences have changed me.

How does all of this play out as we seriously try to obey Commandment Number Five: "Honor your father and mother"? "That it may be well with you," the Bible adds. Even when virus is loose in the land.