

Whatever Next!



Intent to survive

As a child, whenever we were caught on the hop, or something untoward occurred, my mother would exclaim in a somewhat apprehensive voice, *Whatever next!* Nothing of any consequence ever did happen next. Unlike today. With disruption now commonplace, astonishing events pile up like chords in the finale of a Rachmaninoff piano concerto. What an extraordinary era to be living in as our intertwined world turns on itself once again. Whatever next?

There is an inevitability about the coronavirus pandemic. One can almost inhale the sense of panic. We are just at the starting line. Yet already, instability and anxiety are sculpting an unfamiliar world in which everything we thought constant is morphing. Nature has decided to hit the reset button, showing us once again that the control we thought we exercised is only a cruel illusion. Is that a threat or a gift? I think we are about to find out...

Most of what we assume to be enduring is in fact transient. Almost certainly that includes us. We share the planet with around 100 million biological life forms. More than 99 percent of species that ever lived on Earth, over five billion, are estimated to have died out. There is no valid reason to suppose we will be exempt from a similar outcome. Certainly everything that we have created can be terminated in the blink of an eye. Equally of course, once invented anything can be reinvented - usually better than before because human knowledge is expanding exponentially all the time.

Momentarily we are all caught up in the experience of a developing crisis and intent upon survival. Our attention is on adapting to events that are likely to unfold over the coming months as we move inexorably into a global lockdown. When that passes, as it eventually must, we will reconsider the circumstances which led to all of this, viewing ourselves and our activities with a more critical eye.

Looking to the immediate horizon what new disruptions are there in store? Will we still tolerate leaders that trip over every obstacle, and politicians that lie to us constantly but then expect us to

heed their words when catastrophe strikes? Will we still be cowed by fear and ignorance? Will we have learnt to shape events? Or will we remain the victims of circumstance?

Revelations

Throughout history, every epidemic has exploited weaknesses secreted in the most fragile fault lines of the society. Cholera, for example, moved along fissures brought about by poverty. These ecological nooks and crannies allow disease to effortlessly alter geopolitical landscapes and shift personal relationships. They also usher in suppression and entrench socio-economic prejudice.

The fault line exposed by the current pandemic brings clarity to who we really are, relative to others and to nature. Particularly, in this case, our lack of regard for other species. Can we learn from this in order to avoid more disturbing civilisational consequences in the future?

As successive countries mimic each other, going almost from blasé indifference to overreactive panic, one thing is abundantly clear. It is inevitable that we will be transformed in some shape or form by the coronavirus outbreak, possibly in ways we least expect. We must certainly be prepared for it to shape personal interactions and social affiliations, the structure of work, scholarly theories, artistic output, and the built environment.

The most blatant insight to be had already, from the dire situation in which we now find ourselves, is how physically interconnected we all are. We live in such a densely entangled world - one that cannot suddenly be disentangled. Well, not easily. In a reality where damage to an individual is damage to the health of us all, community wellbeing is obviously more important than profits for a few. But our collective behaviours strongly suggest we do not really believe that.

As pandemics run their course they hold up a mirror to societal norms as well as our most common belief systems - reflecting a universal morality underpinning all human activity. The outbreak of COVID-19 makes palpable the rationale of a world that attempts to blend a material reality of fierce interdependence with ethical, political and socio-economic systems that expect people to fend for themselves - leaving us even more defenseless as a species.

Alone-together

Three factors emerge from this stampede towards individual safety. Firstly, the prevailing system of socio-economic stratification means relatively few people have the power and financial resources to disengage and withdraw completely. For those who are neither affluent, nor in receipt of a regular salary, the choice between epidemiological caution and financial survival is stark yet unavoidable.

Secondly, as long as such ethical and political separation keeps driving us back into an unrelenting cycle of desire and consumption, our material interdependence exposes all of us to the same risk.

It is not impossible to envisage the steps needed to contain a pandemic such as this: A slowdown and even a stoppage of all unnecessary work; a return to frugality; massive injections of public funding for income support, including the possibility of a temporary universal wage; a moratorium on debt; finding emergency accommodation for the homeless; and widespread free treatment for everyone infected by the virus.

This scenario of camaraderie and harmony demands that we reinvent those systems that are failing us, by re-evaluating our priorities - changing the focus of business and government from corporate profits to community wellbeing. This heresy is not altogether out of the frame. Politicians in Wales, New Zealand, Scotland and Iceland have concluded as much and are now intent on developing all government policy within that axiom.

Thirdly, responses need to be coordinated universally. It is clear from the range of diverse nation-state reactions to the current crisis, as well as other crises threatening our species, that we are out-

of-step with each other. Rather than displaying a resilience to shifts in human needs, our systems remain finely-calibrated for competition and geared to making profits. By applying context-specific relief the lack of global coordination has been cruelly exposed. This, in turn, threatens human unity.

At a time when we are being instructed to stay away from each other, we need each other even more. Not just some of us. All of us. The whole world needs clean energy, nutritious food, potable water, a decent education, readily-available healthcare and, let us state this quite openly and without shame, armies prepared to put down their weapons and wage peace. We need all of this much more than we need to hurry around doing deals, fighting wars, and exchanging money.

Aftermath

Ultimately we need to decide whether we are here to get wealthy or to help each other live better lives. If we opt for the former, the inevitable trajectory will be overburdened healthcare systems, severe economic downturns, extreme weather events, escalating conflict, and countless deaths.

If the latter, then a total restructuring of power is on the cards. That would certainly change much of *what* we do and *how* we do it. For that reason alone we expect resistance from some quarters. It is highly probable, for example, oligarchs will seize the opportunity to advance already established authoritarian agendas. But other transformative changes are possible.

Success in arresting the rate of infections - resulting from speedy responses, new technological solutions, and the restriction of public movement - while stepping in to provide help to nations that cannot get assistance from elsewhere, like Italy and Serbia, could mean China will move faster into the leadership of a multipolar world with a moral compass that is in glaring contrast to that in the depleted empires of the 20th century. This in spite of an upsurge in hysterical anti-Chinese sentiment and propaganda out of the US.

In upcoming weeks and months we will see a return to what looks like normal. Postponed events will go ahead. Lockdowns will be lifted. Travellers will return to airports as grounded fleets take to the air once again. But we will also have taken this time to reorder our priorities. Perhaps we will become less reliant on getting somewhere at a particular time. Divisions of race, religion, ethnicity, or economic status, may recede into the background. Becoming less frantic means we are more inclined to spend time playing with the kids, taking a nap, reading a book, or writing a poem.

We will also have discovered that some jobs are unnecessary, while others are actually harmful. And we will have to decide what to do about that.

A momentous moral drama is being played out. More than likely we will come through the ordeal changed, having rediscovered our common humanity, more engaged and emotionally connected with our fellow humans than ever before. If that is the case we will think and feel very differently about what it means to be human.

In the words of Kitty O'Meara....

And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the Earth fully, as they had been healed.

