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Coronavirus is a moment to change our way of life

The disease is a warning of our collective and individual fragility – we must show greater compassion towards the planet and to each other.



By Matthew Stadlen



Getty Images

A general view shows clear waters in Venice's Grand Canal near the Rialto Bridge on March 18, 2020, as a result of the stoppage of motorboat traffic.

The clock has been ticking for longer than most of us cared to acknowledge. Most of us knew we risked our futures with the relentlessness with which we were harming the planet. But grasping something intellectually is very different from understanding something emotionally.

Plato identified in the *Protagoras* that we often give undue weight to the prospect of immediate gratification, to the detriment of a more distant but more significant good. We are, most of us, blinded – I'd argue wilfully so – by the trappings of our lifestyles. We prioritise travel, meat eating, convenience and money over our long-term safety and security. Coronavirus isn't itself about climate change, but it is an arrogance-shredding, hubris-busting warning to us all of our communal and individual fragility in the face of life-and-death challenges.

As millions of us first applauded the brave healthcare workers on the front line in the struggle against this virus, and our cheers rang out above the rooftops, tears began to fill my eyes. It was a reminder of what is best in us; a reminder that we are and can be a society and that there are many among us who put others first. Most, if not all of us, have an instinct for what is good and can recognise human kindness when we witness it. Most, if not all of us, are capable of it ourselves. But the great sweep of modern society, certainly in the West, is built, at least in part, on false foundations and the worship of false gods.

It's a set-up that promotes a laziness of the imagination, selfishness, greed, protectiveness of what we already have and covetousness of what we don't yet have. These drivers are built into the capitalist system and enhanced by the exhausting promotion of a #Me culture on social media. The trauma of coronavirus has exposed the short-sightedness of these counter-values. As others have long since pointed out, it feels as though we have all been sent to our rooms to reflect on what we are doing to our planet; not to mention how we treat each other and the other species with which we share it. We are learning, as one writer put it, that we are only as healthy as our neighbour. We are, right across the world, far more thoroughly interconnected than we adequately appreciated.

Generations that have never experienced the hardship and horrors of war have, overnight, been suddenly and savagely shocked out of a rigid complacency. We have been forced onto our sofas and into recognising how vulnerable we are as individuals, as businesses, as political systems and as a species. Now that we can kill each other simply by breathing, the act that keeps us alive, we cannot ignore the risks we face. Of course, as Emily Maitlis has observed on *Newsnight*, those with least will typically be hardest hit, but the virus doesn't respect borders, nor many of the distinctions between rich and poor. The suffering is unquantifiable. Try to imagine your way into homes across the country struck by illness, bereavement, fear, anxiety and depression, by hopes dashed, IVF treatment interrupted, businesses crushed and livelihoods wrecked. As I type, another siren fills the air in the largely empty streets outside.

We are remarkably adaptable. Already, communicating over FaceTime and other video calling apps – for those of us lucky enough to have access to them – has become the new norm. The prospect of meeting someone face to face for those of us who have been self-isolating for weeks, already seems almost alien. It isn't at all clear yet whether, when we leave lockdown, we will even be able to go back to normal. But, if we are, there is a risk that we will simply adapt back to how things were. And if we do that, we may be doomed.

Should we fail in our attempts to address the threats of climate breakdown, overpopulation, famine and antibiotic resistance, those of us who survive the consequences may look back on these weeks as our last, and perhaps most significant, missed opportunity to think again.

The word “crisis” derives from the Latinised form of the Greek word *krisis*, and can mean “turning point in a disease” – a critical juncture. We are, collectively, suffering from a disease – literally and figuratively – and for those of us not busy saving lives, we have to grasp this moment in human history as a chance to cure ourselves. We must look beyond ourselves to see ourselves.

How we choose to reshape our world when we emerge from this strange and disorientating time is down to each of us. As pollution clears from our skies and fish return to the waterways of Venice, we can glimpse a different future. We have it in us to change.

This virus has forced us apart physically, but it has also drawn us together psychologically and spiritually. We have come to realise that we depend, as a matter of life and death, on each other. And we are capable of great compassion. The 750,000-strong army of those who have signed up to become NHS volunteer responders shows this; the doctors and nurses, many of them retired, who are willing to risk their lives to help others, show this; the delivery drivers, supermarket workers, emergency services and postal workers striving to keep the country running, all show this.

We must now show that compassion to the planet and in the way we model our societies. On some level, though buried deep in many of us, we understand that something about the way we have been running our world doesn't quite add up. The time for action is upon us. We must urgently change our lifestyles, and prepare for climate catastrophe regardless. We must strategise far more effectively, and in far more coordinated ways internationally, for the next pandemic. And here in Britain, we must continue to forge a new relationship with each other, where those who keep us alive by administering oxygen or delivering food, are properly valued, where our NHS is properly funded and where all lives are valued equally.

As Franklin Roosevelt said in his presidential inauguration address in 1933: "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyses needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

If we abandon fear and rise, in our different ways, to this challenge with self-sacrifice, clear-sightedness and good will, we can still forge a better future. As we follow the government's guidelines in a united effort to keep each other safe, we can turn our minds – and with hope in our hearts – to what happens next.

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