

Listening to the coronavirus...

Confusion of the unprecedented

On Saturday 14 March 2020, the first deaths from coronavirus were reported in New York City. On that same day in the UK, 21 people had died from coronavirus. Six weeks later – Saturday 25 April – more than 16,000 people have died in New York City as a result of coronavirus and about 20,000 have died as a result of coronavirus in the UK. Enormous loss of life in only six weeks. Some say that deaths are over-reported (because many of those who have died from coronavirus would have died anyway due to underlying health conditions). Some say that deaths are under-reported (because deaths in care homes and at home are not being fully included in the figures). Behind each statistic is a personal story. A human being.

Statistical illiteracy is common. For example, comparing the numbers who have died from coronavirus to the numbers who die annually in car accidents. The distressing litany of deaths includes bus drivers, healthcare workers, delivery drivers – those who have had to or chosen to continue working in public spaces, nearly all of whom are underpaid and overworked and underprotected. Certainly coronavirus impacts unequally upon people. Between those who stack shelves and those who can (like me) work from home; between those who have large houses and those who live in tower blocks; between those with gardens (like me) and those without that space. Between gender. Between ethnicity.

Making mistakes is natural and inevitable, especially in this not-so-brave new world – but still some fingers can be pointed. The UK government's mismanaging of the pandemic – the lack of tests, the lack of personal protective equipment, the initial failure to take this situation seriously – has caused more deaths than should have happened. Kayleigh McEnany, now press secretary for Donald Trump, said on 25 February: “We will not see diseases like the coronavirus come here, we will not see terrorism come here, and isn't that refreshing when contrasting it with the awful Presidency of President Obama?” As of today – 25 April – over 50,000 Americans have died because of coronavirus.

Science and Truth

There is no such thing as One Science. Nor One Truth. Rather, there are sciences and there are truths. Numerous opinions that are both baffling and extremely contrary. Perspectives that come from personal experiences, such as a person with health vulnerabilities who may be more conscious of trying to look after other people. Quite possibly if the steps that have been implemented had *not* been taken, such as the lockdowns, then the death toll from coronavirus might be much more. There are times when it can be better to over-react than to take the dangerous risk of doing too little. A civilised society is partly judged by how well it looks after the more vulnerable. To do too little could be a strategy leading to wrecked health systems and many deaths.

In times of crisis, it is common to look for someone to blame. Blaming others and conspiracy theories are close cousins. Social isolation plus social media plus justified distrust in official authority are further fertilising these fields for conspiracy theories. A wide variety have sprouted: 5G masts or Chinese bioweapons or Bill Gates. Another factor in this potent mix is that disbelief in medical experts is widespread. Modern medicine and pharmaceutical corporations have plenty of pluses – and also many minuses. Such as the opioid epidemic which has partly been caused by

extensive overuse of medication prescribed by doctors for pain management and has killed about 500,000 Americans since 1999. But chattering about conspiracies misses the point. The biggest conspiracy is also the most obvious one – the hugely unequal distribution of money and power that is capitalism.

Then some say that the cure is actually worse than the disease. That shutting down the economy and sowing fear causes more damage than catching coronavirus. A fact is that at least in the short term, overall mortality rates often fall during a recession (possibly because of decreased levels of pollution due to economic slowdown). A fact is that continuing growth within a finite system is a recipe for disaster. And it is also true that in some countries, more people are dying from the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic – such as imposed abrupt uprooting and violent state repression – than currently from coronavirus itself.

One thing is that the future will not be the same as the past. Normality (whatever that is) will not return. People are craving ‘normality’ and governments want a return to the unconscious normal. For many people around the world, it is ‘normality’ that has been the problem. Upwards of 1,000,000 children in India alone die every year because of malnutrition, diarrhoea and other health issues. At least 30,000 women across the world are killed every year by an intimate partner; a woman’s home is the most likely place for her to be killed.

What happens next

We could use the coronavirus pause to shift some stuff. Acknowledging that the amount of air travel that many of us do is environmentally unsustainable. That gross income inequalities are unjust, selfish, indefensible. That some bankers are paid as though they are geniuses yet about every decade they need bailing out. In London, street homeless numbers tripled from 2010 to 2020. According to Shelter, more than 300,000 people in the UK are without a stable home. From 2000 to now, it is estimated that more than 38,000 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean attempting to get to Europe. Our way of being in this world has gone badly wrong. A crisis – like this – can be a path for significantly altering our ways.

What happens next depends on what we do *now*. The last forty years in many parts of the world has been a time of market deregulation, hollowing out of the state and continuing the vast enrichment of a few. Both competition and control have been intensifying in these forty years. Competition and control directly correlate with anxieties. In one person’s words: “Life has inevitable difficulties – no-one can control it all”. Control is an illusion.

During these lockdown days, we can ponder our priorities. Notice how we might respond to the continuation of tight restrictions, increasing chances of deep economic recession, mounting death tolls. During these lockdown days, we can appreciate the quietness and the slowing down, the sunshine and the spring blossom. And during these lockdown days, we can envision what might be.

This is a chance for visioning and re-valuing. There is the saying “If we can’t see it, we can’t be it.” How about fewer things, less striving, more ease? More simplicity, less superficialities, more meaning. Rather than corporate bailouts and rescuing of the extractive industries that have done enormous environmental damage, a more equitable distribution of resources. Instead of this dig and gig economy, a moral economy that is grounded in ecological sustainability and personal needs in contrast to short-term destruction and individual greed.

We can learn from the recent past by reflecting on what happened after the 2008 financial crisis. Vast state funding for banks and bankers bounding back onto the bonus gravy train. The wealthy few were supported, the status quo was maintained, income inequalities increased. It was only a few months ago – autumn 2019 – that average UK wages regained their pre-crisis levels of 2007.

This is a precious opportunity for us to seriously rethink what we are doing with our lives and our societies. What is certain is unpredictability. Many possibilities – ranging from the grim dystopianism of greatly increased state powers, highly developed individual surveillance, further concentration of wealth upwards to communities that are based on living within means, being more responsible, more personally connected. More contented, more local holidaying, more cycling. Schemes such as universal basic income rather than elites hiding their huge wealth in tax havens. In the Star Trek film *Insurrection*, the civilisation is so advanced that their lives are remarkably simple.

It is unfortunate that it takes deaths, panics and crashing economies – in short, crises – to wake us up. When profits are prioritised over planet and people, blowback is inevitable. This has been the Age of More with narcissistic rulers, cults of selfing and lack of empathy toward each other. In the UK we are now directly dealing with the consequences of an underfunded health service, a tattered welfare state and a labour market in which millions are just a few pay packets from impoverishment. The UK economy has been based on financial services that give the very few at top vast rewards for work that is often socially useless. The most socially useful workers – such as nurses and teachers – are treated appallingly.

Terrifying and Boring

This genuine emergency is both terrifying and boring, both drawn-out and unbelievably rapid. These days are dangerous and disorienting. Facing fears of death can bring us into our vulnerability, away from peripheral issues and into present moment existence. The doomsday machine that we have been busily though unconsciously building has momentarily come to a shuddering halt. This creates space for us to examine and evaluate. This pandemic can be a miniscule model for what may happen with climate change – and the next pandemic.

Yet there are plenty of positive shifts. Green new deal plans are already here and are being put in place; mutual aid has become a common expression; taking care of others is a practice enthusiastically embraced by many. Shashi Tharoor – an Indian politician and writer – wrote three weeks ago: “The blissful sight of blue skies and the joy of breathing clean air provides just the contrast to illustrate what we are doing to ourselves the rest of the time”.

Certainly there are no right answers and there are no easy paths. We can be attached to plans yet increasingly we are being assaulted by uncertainties. This is life. I do not know what is going to happen and this is both frightening and exhilarating. I do celebrate the millions who respond by being publicly responsible. This pandemic crisis is going to continue as the disease is not going away. It is a successful virus that will probably circulate in human populations for years. This is less a sprint, much more a marathon. Thus plenty of time for plenty of emotions. Stop. Take a breath. Pausing...

As well as the necessity of a day-by-day approach, can we be imaginative? Can we ask ourselves what is the best service that we can do for this world and all its beings? Can we imagine how we would like the future to be? We need to be on guard to what corporations and banks and governments want to do. They will want business back to usual as quickly as possible with the

added bonuses of repressive surveillance and diminished civil liberties. We can consider how we might like to live – what is important, what can feed our hearts, what can inspire our minds. In my opinion, globalism has to be softened by local orientation – and localism has to be uplifted by global perspectives.

Monumental Moments [...pause...]

What we are living through now are monumental moments in human history. These are incredibly interesting moments. Can we be deeply curious about how we respond and react to what is going on? As coronavirus mocks immigration controls and dances over Trumpian walls, can we notice that during disasters, most people behave in pro-social ways? In a culture that is terrified of death and almost sees dying as a personal failure, can we be more conscious of both our life *and* our mortality?

Coronavirus has slowed down the ceaseless charging that is familiar to so many of us. A pause button has been pressed. The pandemic teaches us that nothing is predictable and that all plans are provisional. Human consciousness has many potentials as well as many embedded patterns. A truth is that human beings are astonishingly adaptable. Let us acknowledge the need for physical distance while cultivating social intimacy, spacious solidarity, grounded mental states and insightful awareness. Let us be grateful for our ability to breathe. Love, community and presence are antidotes to fear, isolation and anxiety. Paths that were considered to be impossible have suddenly become passable. It is in our hands.

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25 April 2020

I have a monthly newsletter – if you would like to receive it, please email me at yogawithnorman@gmail.com