

Tragedy and Rebirth - Life After Quarantine

Leonard Lucius Alf

As lockdowns ease this May and spring lilies remind us of our former lives, a discussion must be had about the post-pandemic society. To this 19-year-old bearing witness from Venice Italy, face masks, social distancing, second waves, and when to reopen a global economy, pale before a more urgent question: what world should we return to?

The coronavirus caught us completely unprepared as it spread invisibly but lethally throughout Eurasia, and then the world. Since then we have learned that no one is above it and that it affects most cruelly the vulnerable, sick, and poor of our society. We've learned the value of family, health, and human interdependence, and how science can defend us from the short-term interests of our politicians, investors, and people who refuse to invest personally in the health of others. More recently, we're learning about the sacrifice required to slow a pandemic's spread. Reopening too soon will trigger further deaths, but as we delay, families go hungry and businesses go bankrupt. We're confronted by a trade-off between prolonged economic hemorrhaging and untold loss of life. We underestimated an abstract threat and are paying the terrible price. Never again.

Covid-19 response is relevant to other crises too

Our response to Covid-19 is relevant to another risk that has been lurking invisibly beyond our homes and economic walls for decades. Forest fires and coastal storms have escalated over years, not days. From a human perspective, these symptoms of a changing climate are difficult to see in the big picture. But they are as real as the burning fevers and flooded lungs of coronavirus victims. Initially, the afflicted have been those unable to resist drought or flee a monsoon. As we fail to act, however, global warming will spread to world-wide proportions; presenting us with a moral pandemic of unspeakable proportions.

Despite these facts, political priorities seem transfixed, as in the first months of Covid-19, on the heartbeat of our economy rather than the rising global thermometer. Invisible, abstract, and distant, climate change, like a blooming epidemic can appear harmless to most people - the oval office included - until it is too late to prevent countless unnecessary deaths.

The severity of the pandemic is measured by body bags stacked in hospital corridors. It is the absence of similarly powerful images in connection to carbon emissions, and not the pretenses of dubious science or insufficient options, that explains the lack of urgency felt in Washington,

Wall Street, and in households worldwide. The warning: “This is not a joke; it will not disappear overnight, and we are not immune” is smoldering before our eyes. Will we wake up to reality this time?

Our current discussion around climate change is timely in many regards: this is a dire situation, we have to act now, and hesitation will make things much worse. However, a shortcoming lies in its insistence that our economic system is to blame, and in criticism of progress in the name of the future. The radical suggestion of hobbling our global economy to reduce emissions is a nature-first premise that discounts the many gifts of modern society. Discounting how life was before, this seems as unacceptable as proceeding unchecked down our current path.

The middle road

There is a middle road, however, between these two extremes. Following it will require sacrifice and change, but our response to COVID offers a glimmer of hope that we can proceed.

First, the quarantine has forced us to adapt, shuttering our economies, closing our stores, and encouraging new ways of life. Companies have reinvented what it means to do business, shifting to local production and distribution while embracing remote work. Already, these small changes have had a major impact on themes most dear to us, such as air pollution and natural regeneration: the skylines in world capitals are clearer than in decades, and I can see fish in Venice’s previously barren canals.

The coronavirus has made us question some of our personal values. A global re-appraisal of “wealth”, catalyzed by economic hardship, is promoting social solidarity and financial security over the glorified - but ultimately empty - notion of a millionaire lifestyle. Moreover, collective sacrifice - employees staying home from work, executives suspending operations, governments underwriting containment measures - is conveying unity, despite the great political divide of our time. Amidst these hardships and the deep pessimism in our society, I see this coming together as a reason for fresh hope.

The vision of American author Tennessee Williams “how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken” evokes, today more than ever, the fortune of living in a world so carefully built by our predecessors. If governments had responded sooner, 2020 could have been our most prosperous year ever. And now, knowing the results of acting too late while recognizing our narrowing window for containing climate change, we should take the pandemic’s lessons to heart.

It's time to carefully consider the facts, act as individuals, and to expect the same from those who lead us. History has proven that the obstacles presented by self-interested politicians and corporations can be overcome by the truth. Our triumph over slavery, for instance, was bitterly opposed by economic interests until humanitarian ideals prevailed - just as they should prevail once again in the environmental discussion today.

Defuse an explosive before it detonates

As we piece together our former world, we must remember how distorted our vision has been at times in the past. By displaying our strengths and weaknesses, these past months have become a primer for our response to future crises such as climate change: when you see an explosive, try to defuse it before it detonates.

We still have an opportunity to rewire the economic matrix of our precious earth. We can emerge from this unified in a common struggle that holds my generation's planetary principles atop the pillars of economic stability.

We can reopen an economy, in other words, that sustains humanity's need for a strong home, and a healthy future -where the very presence of spring lilies reminds us of our accomplishments. That's the world I want to reopen, the world to which I'm now most anxious to return.

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