

After the Pandemic

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Most of the world has closed down: down, not off. The fear of the potential contagion of Covid-19 has stopped us in our tracks. The sky has cleared, plants and small animals are re-emerging along road-sides, people are breathing, really breathing, better because the air is less polluted. The crazy urge to rush around and do something, anything, has been curtailed. Those who have the means are rediscovering their homes and perhaps, rediscovering themselves. They are the lucky ones.

Some people, particularly those who are more introverted than others, and have the means to support themselves in their homes, are doing well. No longer do they need to keep to the demands of others, to be somewhere, to engage with someone, to follow another's timeline, to socialise with colleagues and others they can organise themselves to suit their own needs. Others are finding it difficult to live without the distraction of life and to deal with the self. Many working families have found a new meaning to the work-life balance in a small, crowded space not structured to include office, school and play.

The above is written from the point of view of a privileged Westerner, comfortable in a spacious home with a garden and pleasant walks along a river or nearby wood. It is on these walks that I reflect on my privilege and consider those less privileged. I refer not just to the people in densely populated communities in Africa, South America and Asia and South-East Asia, where access to testing, let alone medical assistance, is limited; people who live hand to mouth, day-by-day, unable to buy in bulk or store what they have bought or harvested. It is easy to be western-centric and bracket people from these countries as unfortunate and something foreign to be dismissed. There are also the families in cities living in apartments, one on top of the other, wall-to-wall, day and night, the sounds of the activities of neighbours intruding without escape to the communal park or garden. I think of those families living with a member who has poor emotional and impulse regulation and compensates by controlling the household members whose usual escape routes are now closed. I think of those people who have no homes, or whose homes are crowded and where there is little opportunity to quarantine or self-isolate. What must their fear look like in these circumstances?

While Asian and European countries are beginning to recover and are considering re-opening commerce, many African countries are just beginning to record cases of Covid-19. Will this mean that a new cycle of the pandemic will develop?

This pandemic has halted human societies. Like any crisis it is a challenge to think and reconsider how we live and how we are to move forward.

Peter Baker, in an essay in *The Guardian Weekly* (10 April 2020) writes that a crisis shapes history and that the reality of a community is laid bare.

Who has more and who has less. Where the power lies. What people treasure and what they fear. In such moments, whatever is broken in society is revealed for just how broken it is, often in the form of haunting little images or stories. [\(\)](#)

What we do next is surely important. What is more important is what we as individuals do and what we allow our governments to do. Already we have seen how some leaders have used the pandemic to their

advantage. In both Israel and Hungary prime ministers have been given the power to rule by decree. Many governments are looking towards surveillance tools to increase monitoring people's activities. The large tech companies will of course be important players in this. They already have far more data on us than most governments. How will these two forces use this information and what will be the limits on its acquisition? We are being assured that such measures are only for the duration of the contagion but it would be easy to keep them in place with the excuse of preparing for the next crisis.

Now is a time to consider what we expect of our governments as well as what sort of society or world we wish to live in.

Rebecca Solnit and Naomi Kline have both raised the question of what happens in the aftermath of disaster. Both writers suggest that it is the choices that people make in the wake of an event that is important; not just as the individual but as a collective. Solnit writes

This is tough stuff to face. But I think by facing it we can begin to imagine the coming transformation and imagine how it can best serve the many and not the few, because what is also coming is an epic battle over what kind of economy we will have and whose needs will be met (i.e. the urgent needs of the desperate versus more padding for the heavily padded, which is what they will mean by returning to normal). There are real possibilities of positive change here, and to say that is not is to ignore the tremendous suffering all around us; it's to face it and say that it can only be alleviated with profound change.

Naomi Klein argues for wealth redistribution, resource sharing and reparations. She has persistently argued that creative focus on finding solutions to climate change and the crisis it presents to us now and particularly to future generations will help us build fairer economies that **“close deep inequalities, strengthen and transform the public sphere, generate plentiful, dignified work and radically rein in corporate power.”** Klein has long argued for us to adopt different narratives about how we live or wish to live.

Perhaps the Corona virus is our new best friend. As a result of it many people have looked around and realised that there is a different way to live and may insist on new structures to enable this. We can be kind to ourselves as well as those well past our borders.

Asad Rehman, executive director of War on Want, suggests that we already have the tools to make world economies more equitable and move away from the north-south exploitation that uses the south as a resource basin to be plundered by the wealthy north. (<http://theleap.org/book-club>) Perhaps we need to be more informed about these and insist that our governments employ them.

For some years environmentalism has been disparaged by many in power (government and industry). We only need to look at Brazil and the apathy of world leaders in taking steps to stop the destruction of vast swathes of the Amazon Basin and its Indigenous people in order to mine its riches and create an agriculture that will drain and poison soil, water, flora and fauna. Sanctions have been applied for less egregious activities. And yet, the environment and its health are vital if we are to prevent further epidemics that may become pandemics.

Covid-19 was caused by a virus that jumped species. It could jump species because of the nature of wet markets in China where exotic animals that are distressed are traded. The naturally resilient immune system of animals becomes compromised when stressed. This can become a breeding ground for viruses. If we continue to degrade our biodiversity through polluting industry, mining and agricultural and trade activities along with land clearing and a continued relaxed response to climate change and its main drivers we can expect further disasters, including pandemics, because the environment is distressed.

We acted on Covid-19 because we were forced to, the driver being its rampant contagion and its threat to human life. Governments, the world over, took action, mostly decisively, enacting bills that six months ago they would have balked at. These were bills that were people-focused, looking after the citizens they were elected to protect rather than the lobbyists and their cohorts. Suddenly the economic conversation changed in a way not thought possible.

Climate change does not confront us in the same way as Covid-19. The impact is slow and subtle. We adjust to its effects rather like the frog in slowly heating water. Like sponges we absorb the losses and associated deprivations until we can't absorb them anymore. That will be the confrontation: increased pollution-related illnesses, inexplicable diseases, food and water shortages, birth anomalies. By then it may be too late and death rates will be higher than just a few million.

Covid-19 is an alert to governments (north, south, east and west) to the need to communicate and work together to re-imagine the future.

Reports from the world over tell inspiring stories of communities coming together to support those who are ill, have lost their jobs, are alone or in a difficult situation. These stories are inspiring and show us another way of living together, focused on community health and well-being rather than cocooned individualism.

Let's move forward together, holding in mind that we actually are in this altogether, regardless of where we live, how much wealth we hold or our status.

<https://lithub.com/rebecca-solnit-life-inside-this-strange-new-fairytale-doesnt-have-to-be-lonely/>

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