

16 Teachings from COVID-19 by Marian Brehmer

“We try to re-create ourselves when things fall apart. We return to the solid ground of our self-concept as quickly as possible. (...) When things fall apart, instead of struggling to regain our concept of who we are, we can use it as an opportunity to be open and inquisitive about what has just happened and what will happen next. That is how we turn this arrow into a flower.”

— Pema Chödrön

A lot is being said these days. Clarity can be hard to come by, silence even more so. Overwhelmed by the cacophony of voices, I sat down to synthesize some perspectives that shine light on the corona crisis. Most of you will already have come across some of those ideas. They show us what we can learn from the current situation. Corona holds a mirror that reflects our relationship with ourselves, with the Earth, with each other and with the broader systems we live in.

Some of the points might seem contradictory to each other. The invitation lies in not trying to resolve those opposites, not even looking for any coherence. Instead let's expand so we become able to hold all the different facets of truth. Whichever of the conflicting narratives around corona you choose to believe, there is one thing we probably all agree on: As a human family, we are faced with a unique moment in history that — like any crisis — holds tremendous gifts.

The Chinese word for crisis consists of two characters: wei, which represents “danger,” and ji, which translates as “turning or changing point” or “opportunity.” No doubt, COVID-19 is a weiji moment for our world.

1. We are all connected.

We heard this many times. We know it to be true, at least intellectually. Many of us have had glimpses of unitive experiences, moments when we feel as if awakening from the slumber of habitual separateness. The current situation quite dramatically makes the truth of oneness visible. We can see more clearly how the destiny of other human beings is interwoven with our own, how in fact all of creation is a web of intricately interconnected relations. As the Persian Sufi poet Saadi spoke almost 800 years ago: “Adam’s children are limbs of one body / That in creation are made of one gem. / When life and time hurt a limb, / Other limbs will not be at ease. / You who are not sad for the suffering of others, / Do not deserve to be called human.”

2. Everything prepared us for this moment.

The wings of our rituals, circles, meditation hours, dhikr invocations, mantras and pilgrimages have carried us to this point in time. We feel grateful for the anchoring power of those practices. They support us to stay present in the midst of chaos and turmoil, be it inside or outside. Those practices help us remain calm and carry our lights, even when everyone else is complaining about the darkness. We know that every thought, word and action, that our very state of being in this moment has an impact on the whole and will ripple out in time.

3. Now is the time to practice and share what we have learnt.

Right now many people are experiencing anxiety, distress and loneliness. We may be sitting on a gift that someone else is in dire need of. The gift of deep and unconditional listening. The gift of holding space, sharing insights or methods of grounding and relaxation. Acts of kindness — in difficult times even more than ordinary ones — break the habit of separation and are a powerful reminder of our interconnectedness. Let us “be the change we wish to see in the world,” as the famous Gandhi quote goes.

4. This is an opportunity to go inside.

When you can't go outside, go inside. With the coming of corona, many of us have moved into a state of involuntary retreat. People have new-found pockets of time that were previously filled with rush and business. Despite Netflix, now it is a little harder to find distractions and avoidances. It is harder to run away from yourself. We are presented with a unique opportunity to stop, look at our lives, reset ourselves and move into presence. We are learning to live our lives from the inside out, instead of the other way around. A friend has expressed it this way: “I feel there is no more excuse, no more half-commitments. I know I must embark on this journey with both my feet.”

5. The crisis makes us see what is really essential.

As people's movement becomes restricted, we have the chance to review our life choices, our habits of travel, entertainment and consumerism. This also pertains to the ways in which we spend our time, the people we relate to, the hours we spend on social media, the jobs we do to make a living. Some of the questions we might ask ourselves: What really serves me? What serves the whole? How do I want to spend the precious years I have left in this body? What is really essential? What attitudes or beliefs am I willing to let go off?

6. The pandemic can bring out our deepest impulses of love and compassion.

The assumption we often hear these days is that pandemics tend to amplify the egotistic sides of human beings. It may be true from one lens. However, we have a choice. Around

the globe we can see plenty of stories of how corona makes human beings follow their deepest impulses of love and compassion. As Mother Teresa used to say, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

7. Corona is a much-needed reset for Mother Nature.

Humanity’s lungs are under attack, but the world is breathing. The Earth is restoring its balance and with it we are. We have heard stories of blue skies in China and dolphins returning to the canals of Venice. Our “sacrifice” in economic and leisurely activity is granting the Earth a much-needed rest. Stanford University researchers estimate that about 77,000 lives are saved by emission reduction in China alone, even daring to ask if the “lives saved from this reduction in pollution caused by economic disruption from COVID-19 exceeds the death toll from the virus itself.”

8. There is a flourishing of creative global solidarity.

From the balcony choirs of Italy to the countless webinars, online classes and spontaneous zoom circles popping up worldwide — there is a worldwide flourishing of creativity. People suddenly feel motivated to learn things they have never tried before. They want to share what they know, because they feel it can benefit others. Almost ironically, isolation seems to lead to a deeper form of solidarity and community. To quote Jack Kornfield: “The veils of separation are parting and the reality of interconnection is apparent to everyone on earth. We have needed this pause, perhaps even needed our isolation to see how much we need one another.”

9. Corona teaches us to live grateful lives.

It is not happy people who are grateful, but grateful people who are happy. The moment we get out of our restricted situations, in a few months or so, we will have the opportunity to be more grateful for all the things we previously took for granted: a leisurely walk in the sun, hugging a beloved friend or eating ice-cream from a street vendor. Making gratitude an intentional practice — right now in this moment of uncertainty — will give us the strength not to fall back into old automatisms. Let’s be grateful for the lungs that serve us untiringly. Grateful for our very ability to breathe in and out. Grateful for waking up to yet another day of fresh opportunities. To quote from David Steindl-Rast’s TED Talk: “If you’re grateful, you’re not fearful. If you’re not fearful, you’re not violent. If you are not fearful, you act out of a sense of enough and not out of a sense of scarcity. You’re willing to share.”

10. Death comes into our awareness.

We have designed societies that seek to avoid death at all cost. With their fetish for youthfulness and entertainment, they seek to blank out ageing and suppress suffering in any way possible. We live under the illusion of permanence, although everything is fundamentally impermanent. Corona suddenly confronts us with our own finiteness.

Consider this perspective from Charles Eisenstein's essay: "The surrounding culture, however, lobbies us relentlessly to live in fear, and has constructed systems that embody fear. In them, staying safe is over-ridingly important. Thus we have a medical system in which most decisions are based on calculations of risk, and in which the worst possible outcome, marking the physician's ultimate failure, is death. Yet all the while, we know that death awaits us regardless. A life saved actually means a death postponed." On another note, corona brings up the other death rates we haven't been bothered about: the five million children that died of hunger last year or the countless suicides that stem from poor mental health levels in today's world. What about the rapid death of our planet's biodiversity? Why have we not been able to tackle those issues with the same determination as we do with corona?

11. We learn to stay humble in the midst of not knowing.

Tired by the constant flood of information, statistics, opinions and predictions we gradually come to a humbling conclusion: the fact that we simply don't know. This pertains to the current situation, but on a deeper level it touches our very human condition. The realization of not knowing can bring about deep humility on an individual and collective level. Instead of rushing forward in self-importance with our answers and solutions, we learn to surrender to a greater place — call it God, Life or Nature. Learning to stay in the unknown allows us to prepare the grounds for fresh, authentic, well-rooted knowledge to emerge. This kind of knowledge comes with a profound intuitive quality that originates from a focused and fearless mind. This goes for both groups who hold on to solid views: those who follow the dominant corona narrative and those who oppose it.

12. Corona makes us face our fears.

We can also see the virus as a symbol for our fear of the invisible and uncontrollable. As C.G. Jung and others suggested, the fear of the invisible is in reality a projection of the fear of our own unconscious, the dark parts in us that we cannot control and analyze with our habitual minds. Right now we are called to get in touch with our fears, to acknowledge the scared, the wounded, the broken parts in ourselves without escaping from them. As escape routes gradually become less and we are left with our discomfort, we have no choice but facing those shadows. Grieving together for our pain and for the pain of the planet is an important healing practice in this process. As they say: The way out is through — individually, as well as collectively.

13. Corona holds the potential to be a turning point.

Corona is a crossroads for human civilization. It is the inevitable breakdown that many of us have seen coming. The crisis exposes and might eventually dismantle some of our dysfunctional systems. It also highlights two different modes of operation between which human beings now have a choice: The dominant paradigms of control, war ("fighting against the virus"), domination, power and surveillance or the emerging qualities of love, connection, compassion, care and sharing? We're currently seeing examples of both roads being taken. Which one will you take and what does it take to embody your choice?

14. Do we really want to go back to normal?

In most places, corona has closed down business as usual. People have been derailed from the tracks of their habits. The grip of normality has loosened. Some are longing to return to normality. But if humanity is to evolve, we need to remain strong vis-à-vis the pull towards business as usual. In the words of Eisenstein, “to interrupt a habit is to make it visible; it is to turn it from a compulsion to a choice. When the crisis subsides, we might have occasion to ask whether we want to return to normal, or whether there might be something we’ve seen during this break in the routines that we want to bring into the future.”

15. Corona shows that rapid change is possible.

When humanity is united in a common cause, rapid change previously thought unimaginable becomes possible. Again quoting Eisenstein, “none of the world’s problems are technically difficult to solve; they originate in human disagreement. In coherency, humanity’s creative powers are boundless.” Who would have thought that almost from one day to the other humans could bring most of the world’s air traffic to a halt?

16. Let’s hold the vision of what can come after this.

How will life be like when we are all back on the streets? How will we relate to each other? What will we have learnt? What will we do differently? During this period of sitting in the “darkness of not knowing,” we can hold the vision of a more beautiful, more loving world in our hearts. We begin to understand that “the system” is not somewhere out there, but in fact we are ourselves the system. Everything we do from a place of love and connection strengthens the field of love and connection. What is it that wants to emerge through me into reality? How can I be myself the change I wish to see in the world?

RESOURCES:

Charles Eisenstein. The Coronation

Jack Kornfield. The Bodhisattva Response to Coronavirus

Luke Healy. Disruption as Invitation — Discovering New Ways of Being

Otto Scharmer. Eight Emerging Lessons: From Coronavirus to Climate Action