

## Charles Eisenstein: The Coronation by Charles Eisenstein

For years, normality has been stretched nearly to its breaking point, a rope pulled tighter and tighter, waiting for a nip of the black swan's beak to snap it in two. Now that the rope has snapped, do we tie its ends back together, or shall we undo its dangling braids still further, to see what we might weave from them?

Covid-19 is showing us that when humanity is united in common cause, phenomenally rapid change is possible. None of the world's problems are technically difficult to solve; they originate in human disagreement. In coherency, humanity's creative powers are boundless. A few months ago, a proposal to halt commercial air travel would have seemed preposterous. Likewise for the radical changes we are making in our social behavior, economy, and the role of government in our lives. Covid demonstrates the power of our collective will when we agree on what is important. What else might we achieve, in coherency? What do we want to achieve, and what world shall we create? That is always the next question when anyone awakens to their power.

Covid-19 is like a rehab intervention that breaks the addictive hold of normality. 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. We might ask, after so many have lost their jobs, whether all of them are the jobs the world most needs, and whether our labor and creativity would be better applied elsewhere. We might ask, having done without it for a while, whether we really need so much air travel, Disneyworld vacations, or trade shows. What parts of the economy will we want to restore, and what parts might we choose to let go of? And on a darker note, what among the things that are being taken away right now – civil liberties, freedom of assembly, sovereignty over our bodies, in-person gatherings, hugs, handshakes, and public life – might we need to exert intentional political and personal will to restore?

For most of my life, I have had the feeling that humanity was nearing a crossroads. Always, the crisis, the collapse, the break was imminent, just around the bend, but it didn't come and it didn't come. Imagine walking a road, and up ahead you see it, you see the crossroads. It's just over the hill, around the bend, past the woods. Cresting the hill, you see you were mistaken, it was a mirage, it was farther away than you thought. You keep walking. Sometimes it comes into view, sometimes it disappears from sight and it seems like this road goes on forever. Maybe there isn't a crossroads. No, there it is again! Always it is almost here. Never is it here.

Now, all of a sudden, we go around a bend and here it is. We stop, hardly able to believe that now it is happening, hardly able to believe, after years of confinement to the road of our predecessors, that now we finally have a choice. We are right to stop, stunned at the

newness of our situation. Because of the hundred paths that radiate out in front of us, some lead in the same direction we've already been headed. Some lead to hell on earth. And some lead to a world more healed and more beautiful than we ever dared believe to be possible.

I write these words with the aim of standing here with you – bewildered, scared maybe, yet also with a sense of new possibility – at this point of diverging paths. Let us gaze down some of them and see where they lead.

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I heard this story last week from a friend. She was in a grocery store and saw a woman sobbing in the aisle. Flouting social distancing rules, she went to the woman and gave her a hug. "Thank you," the woman said, "that is the first time anyone has hugged me for ten days."

Going without hugs for a few weeks seems a small price to pay if it will stem an epidemic that could take millions of lives. There is a strong argument for social distancing in the near term: to prevent a sudden surge of Covid cases from overwhelming the medical system. I would like to put that argument in a larger context, especially as we look to the long term. Lest we institutionalize distancing and reengineer society around it, let us be aware of what choice we are making and why.

The same goes for the other changes happening around the coronavirus epidemic. Some commentators have observed how it plays neatly into an agenda of totalitarian control. A frightened public accepts abridgments of civil liberties that are otherwise hard to justify, such as the tracking of everyone's movements at all times, forcible medical treatment, involuntary quarantine, restrictions on travel and the freedom of assembly, censorship of what the authorities deem to be disinformation, suspension of habeas corpus, and military policing of civilians. Many of these were underway before Covid-19; since its advent, they have been irresistible. The same goes for the automation of commerce; the transition from participation in sports and entertainment to remote viewing; the migration of life from public to private spaces; the transition away from place-based schools toward online education, the decline of brick-and-mortar stores, and the movement of human work and leisure onto screens. Covid-19 is accelerating preexisting trends, political, economic, and social.

While all the above are, in the short term, justified on the grounds of flattening the curve (the epidemiological growth curve), we are also hearing a lot about a "new normal"; that is to say, the changes may not be temporary at all. Since the threat of infectious disease, like the threat of terrorism, never goes away, control measures can easily become permanent. If we were going in this direction anyway, the current justification must be part of a deeper impulse. I will analyze this impulse in two parts: the reflex of control, and the war on death. Thus understood, an initiatory opportunity emerges, one that we are seeing already in the form of the solidarity, compassion, and care that Covid-19 has inspired.

### The Reflex of Control

At the current writing, official statistics say that about 25,000 people have died from Covid-19. (Update: that was March 25. Now, on April 2, it is 50,000. I won't keep updating. Whatever numbers I use will be obsolete by the time most people read this.) By the time it runs its course, the death toll could be ten times or a hundred times bigger, or

even, if the most alarming guesses are right, a thousand times bigger. Each one of these people has loved ones, family and friends. Compassion and conscience call us to do what we can to avert unnecessary tragedy. This is personal for me: my own infinitely dear but frail mother is among the most vulnerable to a disease that kills mostly the aged and the infirm.

What will the final numbers be? That question is impossible to answer at the time of this writing. Early reports were alarming; for weeks the official number from Wuhan, circulated endlessly in the media, was a shocking 3.4%. That, coupled with its highly contagious nature, pointed to tens of millions of deaths worldwide, or even as many as 100 million. More recently, estimates have plunged as it has become apparent that most cases are mild or asymptomatic. Since testing has been skewed towards the seriously ill, the death rate has looked artificially high. In South Korea, where hundreds of thousands of people with mild symptoms have been tested, the reported case fatality rate is around 1%. In Germany, whose testing also extends to many with mild symptoms, the fatality rate is 0.4%. A recent paper in the journal *Science* argues that 86% of infections have been undocumented, which points to a much lower mortality rate than the current case fatality rate would indicate.

The story of the Diamond Princess cruise ship bolsters this view. Of the 3,711 people on board, about 20% have tested positive for the virus; less than half of those had symptoms, and eight have died. A cruise ship is a perfect setting for contagion, and there was plenty of time for the virus to spread on board before anyone did anything about it, yet only a fifth were infected. Furthermore, the cruise ship's population was heavily skewed (as are most cruise ships) toward the elderly

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: nearly a third of the passengers were over age 70, and more than half were over age 60. A research team concluded from the large number of asymptomatic cases that the true fatality rate in China is around 0.5%. That is still five times higher than flu. Based on the above (and adjusting for much younger demographics in Africa and South and Southeast Asia) my guess is about 200,000-300,000 deaths in the US - more if the medical system is overwhelmed, less if infections are spread out over time - and 3 million globally. Those are serious numbers. Not since the Hong Kong Flu pandemic of 1968/9 has the world experienced anything like it.

My guesses could easily be off by an order of magnitude in either direction. Every day the media reports the total number of Covid-19 cases, but no one has any idea what the true number is, because only a tiny proportion of the population has been tested. If tens of millions have the virus, asymptotically, we would not know it. Further complicating the matter is the high rate of false positives for existing testing, possibly as high as 80%. (And see here for even more alarming uncertainties about test accuracy.) Let me repeat: no one knows what is really happening, including me. Let us be aware of two contradictory tendencies in human affairs. The first is the tendency for hysteria to feed on itself, to exclude data points that don't play into the fear, and to create the world in its image. The second is denial, the irrational rejection of information that might disrupt normalcy and comfort. As Daniel Schmactenberger asks, How do you know what you believe is true?

In the face of the uncertainty, I'd like to make a prediction: The crisis will play out so that we never will know. If the final death tally, which will itself be the subject of dispute, is lower than feared, some will say that is because the controls worked. Others will say it is because the disease wasn't as dangerous as we were told.

To me, the most baffling puzzle is why at the present writing there seem to be no new cases in China. The government didn't initiate its lockdown until well after the virus was established. It should have spread widely during Chinese New Year, when, despite a few travel restrictions, nearly every plane, train, and bus is packed with people traveling all over the country. What is going on here? Again, I don't know, and neither do you.

Whether the final global death toll is 50,000 or 500,000 or 5 million, let's look at some other numbers to get some perspective. My point is NOT that Covid isn't so bad and we shouldn't do anything. Bear with me. Last year, according to the FAO, five million children worldwide died of hunger (among 162 million who are stunted and 51 million who are wasted). That is 200 times more people than have died so far from Covid-19, yet no government has declared a state of emergency or asked that we radically alter our way of life to save them. Nor do we see a comparable level of alarm and action around suicide – the mere tip of an iceberg of despair and depression – which kills over a million people a year globally and 50,000 in the USA. Or drug overdoses, which kill 70,000 in the USA, the autoimmunity epidemic, which affects 23.5 million (NIH figure) to 50 million (AARDA), or obesity, which afflicts well over 100 million. Why, for that matter, are we not in a frenzy about averting nuclear armageddon or ecological collapse, but, to the contrary, pursue choices that magnify those very dangers?

Please, the point here is not that we haven't changed our ways to stop children from starving, so we shouldn't change them for Covid either. It is the contrary: If we can change so radically for Covid-19, we can do it for these other conditions too. Let us ask why are we able to unify our collective will to stem this virus, but not to address other grave threats to humanity. Why, until now, has society been so frozen in its existing trajectory?

The answer is revealing. Simply, in the face of world hunger, addiction, autoimmunity, suicide, or ecological collapse, we as a society do not know what to do. Our go-to crisis responses, all of which are some version of control, aren't very effective in addressing these conditions. Now along comes a contagious epidemic, and finally we can spring into action. It is a crisis for which control works: quarantines, lockdowns, isolation, hand-washing; control of movement, control of information, control of our bodies. That makes Covid a convenient receptacle for our inchoate fears, a place to channel our growing sense of helplessness in the face of the changes overtaking the world. Covid-19 is a threat that we know how to meet. Unlike so many of our other fears, Covid-19 offers a plan.

Our civilization's established institutions are increasingly helpless to meet the challenges of our time. How they welcome a challenge that they finally can meet. How eager they are to embrace it as a paramount crisis. How naturally their systems of information management select for the most alarming portrayals of it. How easily the public joins the panic, embracing a threat that the authorities can handle as a proxy for the various unspeakable threats that they cannot.

Today, most of our challenges no longer succumb to force. Our antibiotics and surgery fail to meet the surging health crises of autoimmunity, addiction, and obesity. Our guns and bombs, built to conquer armies, are useless to erase hatred abroad or keep domestic violence out of our homes. Our police and prisons cannot heal the breeding conditions of crime. Our pesticides cannot restore ruined soil. Covid-19 recalls the good old days when the challenges of infectious diseases succumbed to modern medicine and hygiene, at the same time as the Nazis succumbed to the war machine, and nature itself succumbed, or

so it seemed, to technological conquest and improvement. It recalls the days when our weapons worked and the world seemed indeed to be improving with each technology of control.

What kind of problem succumbs to domination and control? The kind caused by something from the outside, something Other. When the cause of the problem is something intimate to ourselves, like homelessness or inequality, addiction or obesity, there is nothing to war against. We may try to install an enemy, blaming, for example, the billionaires, Vladimir Putin, or the Devil, but then we miss key information, such as the ground conditions that allow billionaires (or viruses) to replicate in the first place.

If there is one thing our civilization is good at, it is fighting an enemy. We welcome opportunities to do what we are good at, which prove the validity of our technologies, systems, and worldview. And so, we manufacture enemies, cast problems like crime, terrorism, and disease into us-versus-them terms, and mobilize our collective energies toward those endeavors that can be seen that way. Thus, we single out Covid-19 as a call to arms, reorganizing society as if for a war effort, while treating as normal the possibility of nuclear armageddon, ecological collapse, and five million children starving.

### The Conspiracy Narrative

Because Covid-19 seems to justify so many items on the totalitarian wish list, there are those who believe it to be a deliberate power play. It is not my purpose to advance that theory nor to debunk it, although I will offer some meta-level comments. First a brief overview.

The theories (there are many variants) talk about Event 201 (sponsored by the Gates Foundation, CIA, etc. last September), and a 2010 Rockefeller Foundation white paper detailing a scenario called "Lockstep," both of which lay out the authoritarian response to a hypothetical pandemic. They observe that the infrastructure, technology, and legislative framework for martial law has been in preparation for many years. All that was needed, they say, was a way to make the public embrace it, and now that has come. Whether or not current controls are permanent, a precedent is being set for:

- The tracking of people's movements at all times (because coronavirus)
- The suspension of freedom of assembly (because coronavirus)
- The military policing of civilians (because coronavirus)
- Extrajudicial, indefinite detention (quarantine, because coronavirus)
- The banning of cash (because coronavirus)
- Censorship of the Internet (to combat disinformation, because coronavirus)
- Compulsory vaccination and other medical treatment, establishing the state's sovereignty over our bodies (because coronavirus)
- The classification of all activities and destinations into the expressly permitted and the expressly forbidden (you can leave your house for this, but not that), eliminating the un-policed, non-judicial gray zone. That totality is the very essence of totalitarianism. Necessary now though, because, well, coronavirus.

This is juicy material for conspiracy theories. For all I know, one of those theories could be true; however, the same progression of events could unfold from an unconscious systemic tilt toward ever-increasing control. Where does this tilt come from? It is woven into civilization's DNA. For millennia, civilization (as opposed to small-scale traditional

cultures) has understood progress as a matter of extending control onto the world: domesticating the wild, conquering the barbarians, mastering the forces of nature, and ordering society according to law and reason. The ascent of control accelerated with the Scientific Revolution, which launched “progress” to new heights: the ordering of reality into objective categories and quantities, and the mastering of materiality with technology. Finally, the social sciences promised to use the same means and methods to fulfill the ambition (which goes back to Plato and Confucius) to engineer a perfect society.

Those who administer civilization will therefore welcome any opportunity to strengthen their control, for after all, it is in service to a grand vision of human destiny: the perfectly ordered world, in which disease, crime, poverty, and perhaps suffering itself can be engineered out of existence. No nefarious motives are necessary. Of course they would like to keep track of everyone – all the better to ensure the common good. For them, Covid-19 shows how necessary that is. “Can we afford democratic freedoms in light of the coronavirus?” they ask. “Must we now, out of necessity, sacrifice those for our own safety?” It is a familiar refrain, for it has accompanied other crises in the past, like 9/11.

To rework a common metaphor, imagine a man with a hammer, stalking around looking for a reason to use it. Suddenly he sees a nail sticking out. He’s been looking for a nail for a long time, pounding on screws and bolts and not accomplishing much. He inhabits a worldview in which hammers are the best tools, and the world can be made better by pounding in the nails. And here is a nail! We might suspect that in his eagerness he has placed the nail there himself, but it hardly matters. Maybe it isn’t even a nail that’s sticking out, but it resembles one enough to start pounding. When the tool is at the ready, an opportunity will arise to use it.

And I will add, for those inclined to doubt the authorities, maybe this time it really is a nail. In that case, the hammer is the right tool – and the principle of the hammer will emerge the stronger, ready for the screw, the button, the clip, and the tear.

Either way, the problem we deal with here is much deeper than that of overthrowing an evil coterie of Illuminati. Even if they do exist, given the tilt of civilization, the same trend would persist without them, or a new Illuminati would arise to assume the functions of the old.

True or false, the idea that the epidemic is some monstrous plot perpetrated by evildoers upon the public is not so far from the mindset of find-the-pathogen. It is a crusading mentality, a war mentality. It locates the source of a sociopolitical illness in a pathogen against which we may then fight, a victimizer separate from ourselves. It risks ignoring the conditions that make society fertile ground for the plot to take hold. Whether that ground was sown deliberately or by the wind is, for me, a secondary question.

What I will say next is relevant whether or not SARS-CoV2 is a genetically engineered bioweapon, is related to 5G rollout, is being used to prevent “disclosure,” is a Trojan horse for totalitarian world government, is more deadly than we’ve been told, is less deadly than we’ve been told, originated in a Wuhan biolab, originated at Fort Detrick, or is exactly as the CDC and WHO have been telling us. It applies even if everyone is totally wrong

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about the role of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the current epidemic. I have my opinions, but if there is one thing I have learned through the course of this emergency is that I don’t really know what is happening. I don’t see how anyone can, amidst the seething farrago

of news, fake news, rumors, suppressed information, conspiracy theories, propaganda, and politicized narratives that fill the Internet. I wish a lot more people would embrace not knowing. I say that both to those who embrace the dominant narrative, as well as to those who hew to dissenting ones. What information might we be blocking out, in order to maintain the integrity of our viewpoints? Let's be humble in our beliefs: it is a matter of life and death.

## The War on Death

My 7-year-old son hasn't seen or played with another child for two weeks. Millions of others are in the same boat. Most would agree that a month without social interaction for all those children a reasonable sacrifice to save a million lives. But how about to save 100,000 lives? And what if the sacrifice is not for a month but for a year? Five years? Different people will have different opinions on that, according to their underlying values.

Let's replace the foregoing questions with something more personal, that pierces the inhuman utilitarian thinking that turns people into statistics and sacrifices some of them for something else. The relevant question for me is, Would I ask all the nation's children to forego play for a season, if it would reduce my mother's risk of dying, or for that matter, my own risk? Or I might ask, Would I decree the end of human hugging and handshakes, if it would save my own life? This is not to devalue Mom's life or my own, both of which are precious. I am grateful for every day she is still with us. But these questions bring up deep issues. What is the right way to live? What is the right way to die?

The answer to such questions, whether asked on behalf of oneself or on behalf of society at large, depends on how we hold death and how much we value play, touch, and togetherness, along with civil liberties and personal freedom. There is no easy formula to balance these values.

Over my lifetime I've seen society place more and more emphasis on safety, security, and risk reduction. It has especially impacted childhood: as a young boy it was normal for us to roam a mile from home unsupervised – behavior that would earn parents a visit from Child Protective Services today. It also manifests in the form of latex gloves for more and more professions; hand sanitizer everywhere; locked, guarded, and surveilled school buildings; intensified airport and border security; heightened awareness of legal liability and liability insurance; metal detectors and searches before entering many sports arenas and public buildings, and so on. Writ large, it takes the form of the security state.

The mantra "safety first" comes from a value system that makes survival top priority, and that depreciates other values like fun, adventure, play, and the challenging of limits. Other cultures had different priorities. For instance, many traditional and indigenous cultures are much less protective of children, as documented in Jean Liedloff's classic, *The Continuum Concept*. They allow them risks and responsibilities that would seem insane to most modern people, believing that this is necessary for children to develop self-reliance and good judgement. I think most modern people, especially younger people, retain some of this inherent willingness to sacrifice safety in order to live life fully. 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.

The ultimate fulfillment of civilization's program of control would be to triumph over death

itself. Failing that, modern society settles for a facsimile of that triumph: denial rather than conquest. Ours is a society of death denial, from its hiding away of corpses, to its fetish for youthfulness, to its warehousing of old people in nursing homes. Even its obsession with money and property – extensions of the self, as the word “mine” indicates – expresses the delusion that the impermanent self can be made permanent through its attachments. All this is inevitable given the story-of-self that modernity offers: the separate individual in a world of Other. Surrounded by genetic, social, and economic competitors, that self must protect and dominate in order to thrive. It must do everything it can to forestall death, which (in the story of separation) is total annihilation. Biological science has even taught us that our very nature is to maximize our chances of surviving and reproducing.

I asked a friend, a medical doctor who has spent time with the Q'ero in Peru, whether the Q'ero would (if they could) intubate someone to prolong their life. “Of course not,” she said. “They would summon the shaman to help him die well.” Dying well (which isn't necessarily the same as dying painlessly) is not much in today's medical vocabulary. No hospital records are kept on whether patients die well. That would not be counted as a positive outcome. In the world of the separate self, death is the ultimate catastrophe.

But is it? Consider this perspective from Dr. Lissa Rankin: “Not all of us would want to be in an ICU, isolated from loved ones with a machine breathing for us, at risk of dying alone—even if it means they might increase their chance of survival. Some of us might rather be held in the arms of loved ones at home, even if that means our time has come.... Remember, death is no ending. Death is going home.”

When the self is understood as relational, interdependent, even inter-existent, then it bleeds over into the other, and the other bleeds over into the self. Understanding the self as a locus of consciousness in a matrix of relationship, one no longer searches for an enemy as the key to understanding every problem, but looks instead for imbalances in relationships. The War on Death gives way to the quest to live well and fully, and we see that fear of death is actually fear of life. How much of life will we forego to stay safe?

Totalitarianism – the perfection of control – is the inevitable end product of the mythology of the separate self. What else but a threat to life, like a war, would merit total control? Thus Orwell identified perpetual war as a crucial component of the Party's rule.

Against the backdrop of the program of control, death denial, and the separate self, the assumption that public policy should seek to minimize the number of deaths is nearly beyond question, a goal to which other values like play, freedom, etc. are subordinate. Covid-19 offers occasion to broaden that view. Yes, let us hold life sacred, more sacred than ever. Death teaches us that. Let us hold each person, young or old, sick or well, as the sacred, precious, beloved being that they are. And in the circle of our hearts, let us make room for other sacred values too. To hold life sacred is not just to live long, it is to live well and right and fully.

Like all fear, the fear around the coronavirus hints at what might lie beyond it. Anyone who has experienced the passing of someone close knows that death is a portal to love. Covid-19 has elevated death to prominence in the consciousness of a society that denies it. On the other side of the fear, we can see the love that death liberates. Let it pour forth. Let it saturate the soil of our culture and fill its aquifers so that it seeps up through the cracks of our crusted institutions, our systems, and our habits. Some of these may die too.

What world shall we live in?

How much of life do we want to sacrifice at the altar of security? If it keeps us safer, do we want to live in a world where human beings never congregate? Do we want to wear masks in public all the time? Do we want to be medically examined every time we travel, if that will save some number of lives a year? Are we willing to accept the medicalization of life in general, handing over final sovereignty over our bodies to medical authorities (as selected by political ones)? Do we want every event to be a virtual event? How much are we willing to live in fear?

Covid-19 will eventually subside, but the threat of infectious disease is permanent. Our response to it sets a course for the future. Public life, communal life, the life of shared physicality has been dwindling over several generations. Instead of shopping at stores, we get things delivered to our homes. Instead of packs of kids playing outside, we have play dates and digital adventures. Instead of the public square, we have the online forum. Do we want to continue to insulate ourselves still further from each other and the world?

It is not hard to imagine, especially if social distancing is successful, that Covid-19 persists beyond the 18 months we are being told to expect for it to run its course. It is not hard to imagine that new viruses will emerge during that time. It is not hard to imagine that emergency measures will become normal (so as to forestall the possibility of another outbreak), just as the state of emergency declared after 9/11 is still in effect today. It is not hard to imagine that (as we are being told), reinfection is possible, so that the disease will never run its course. That means that the temporary changes in our way of life may become permanent.

To reduce the risk of another pandemic, shall we choose to live in a society without hugs, handshakes, and high-fives, forever more? Shall we choose to live in a society where we no longer gather en masse? Shall the concert, the sports competition, and the festival be a thing of the past? Shall children no longer play with other children? Shall all human contact be mediated by computers and masks? No more dance classes, no more karate classes, no more conferences, no more churches? Is death reduction to be the standard by which to measure progress? Does human advancement mean separation? Is this the future?

The same question applies to the administrative tools required to control the movement of people and the flow of information. At the present writing, the entire country is moving toward lockdown. In some countries, one must print out a form from a government website in order to leave the house. It reminds me of school, where one's location must be authorized at all times. Or of prison. Do we envision a future of electronic hall passes, a system where freedom of movement is governed by state administrators and their software at all times, permanently? Where every movement is tracked, either permitted or prohibited? And, for our protection, where information that threatens our health (as decided, again, by various authorities) is censored for our own good? In the face of an emergency, like unto a state of war, we accept such restrictions and temporarily surrender our freedoms. Similar to 9/11, Covid-19 trumps all objections.

For the first time in history, the technological means exist to realize such a vision, at least in the developed world (for example, using cellphone location data to enforce social distancing; see also here). After a bumpy transition, we could live in a society where nearly all of life happens online: shopping, meeting, entertainment, socializing, working, even dating. Is that what we want? How many lives saved is that worth?

I am sure that many of the controls in effect today will be partially relaxed in a few

months. Partially relaxed, but at the ready. As long as infectious disease remains with us, they are likely to be reimposed, again and again, in the future, or be self-imposed in the form of habits. As Deborah Tannen says, contributing to a Politico article on how coronavirus will change the world permanently, 'We know now that touching things, being with other people and breathing the air in an enclosed space can be risky.... It could become second nature to recoil from shaking hands or touching our faces—and we may all fall heir to society-wide OCD, as none of us can stop washing our hands.' After thousands of years, millions of years, of touch, contact, and togetherness, is the pinnacle of human progress to be that we cease such activities because they are too risky?

## Life is Community

The paradox of the program of control is that its progress rarely advances us any closer to its goal. Despite security systems in almost every upper middle-class home, people are no less anxious or insecure than they were a generation ago. Despite elaborate security measures, the schools are not seeing fewer mass shootings. Despite phenomenal progress in medical technology, people have if anything become less healthy over the past thirty years, as chronic disease has proliferated and life expectancy stagnated and, in the USA and Britain, started to decline.

The measures being instituted to control Covid-19, likewise, may end up causing more suffering and death than they prevent. Minimizing deaths means minimizing the deaths that we know how to predict and measure. It is impossible to measure the added deaths that might come from isolation-induced depression, for instance, or the despair caused by unemployment, or the lowered immunity and deterioration in health that chronic fear can cause. Loneliness and lack of social contact has been shown to increase inflammation, depression, and dementia. According to Lissa Rankin, M.D., air pollution increases risk of dying by 6%, obesity by 23%, alcohol abuse by 37%, and loneliness by 45%.

Another danger that is off the ledger is the deterioration in immunity caused by excessive hygiene and distancing. It is not only social contact that is necessary for health, it is also contact with the microbial world. Generally speaking, microbes are not our enemies, they are our allies in health. A diverse gut biome, comprising bacteria, viruses, yeasts, and other organisms, is essential for a well-functioning immune system, and its diversity is maintained through contact with other people and with the world of life. Excessive hand-washing, overuse of antibiotics, aseptic cleanliness, and lack of human contact might do more harm than good. The resulting allergies and autoimmune disorders might be worse than the infectious disease they replace. Socially and biologically, health comes from community. Life does not thrive in isolation.

Seeing the world in us-versus-them terms blinds us to the reality that life and health happen in community. To take the example of infectious diseases, we fail to look beyond the evil pathogen and ask, What is the role of viruses in the microbiome? (See also here.) What are the body conditions under which harmful viruses proliferate? Why do some people have mild symptoms and others severe ones (besides the catch-all non-explanation of "low resistance")? What positive role might flus, colds, and other non-lethal diseases play in the maintenance of health?

War-on-germs thinking brings results akin to those of the War on Terror, War on Crime, War on Weeds, and the endless wars we fight politically and interpersonally. First, it generates endless war; second, it diverts attention from the ground conditions that breed illness, terrorism, crime, weeds, and the rest.

Despite politicians' perennial claim that they pursue war for the sake of peace, war inevitably breeds more war. Bombing countries to kill terrorists not only ignores the ground conditions of terrorism, it exacerbates those conditions. Locking up criminals not only ignores the conditions that breed crime, it creates those conditions when it breaks up families and communities and acculturates the incarcerated to criminality. And regimes of antibiotics, vaccines, antivirals, and other medicines wreak havoc on body ecology, which is the foundation of strong immunity. Outside the body, the massive spraying campaigns sparked by Zika, Dengue Fever, and now Covid-19 will visit untold damage upon nature's ecology. Has anyone considered what the effects on the ecosystem will be when we douse it with antiviral compounds? Such a policy (which has been implemented in various places in China and India) is only thinkable from the mindset of separation, which does not understand that viruses are integral to the web of life.

To understand the point about ground conditions, consider some mortality statistics from Italy (from its National Health Institute), based on an analysis of hundreds of Covid-19 fatalities. Of those analyzed, less than 1% were free of serious chronic health conditions. Some 75% suffered from hypertension, 35% from diabetes, 33% from cardiac ischemia, 24% from atrial fibrillation, 18% from low renal function, along with other conditions that I couldn't decipher from the Italian report

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. Nearly half the deceased had three or more of these serious pathologies. Americans, beset by obesity, diabetes, and other chronic ailments, are at least as vulnerable as Italians. Should we blame the virus then (which killed few otherwise healthy people), or shall we blame underlying poor health? Here again the analogy of the taut rope applies. Millions of people in the modern world are in a precarious state of health, just waiting for something that would normally be trivial to send them over the edge. Of course, in the short term we want to save their lives; the danger is that we lose ourselves in an endless succession of short terms, fighting one infectious disease after another, and never engage the ground conditions that make people so vulnerable. That is a much harder problem, because these ground conditions will not change via fighting. There is no pathogen that causes diabetes or obesity, addiction, depression, or PTSD. Their causes are not an Other, not some virus separate from ourselves, and we its victims.

Even in diseases like Covid-19, in which we can name a pathogenic virus, matters are not so simple as a war between virus and victim. There is an alternative to the germ theory of disease that holds germs to be part of a larger process. When conditions are right, they multiply in the body, sometimes killing the host, but also, potentially, improving the conditions that accommodated them to begin with, for example by cleaning out accumulated toxic debris via mucus discharge, or (metaphorically speaking) burning them up with fever. Sometimes called "terrain theory," it says that germs are more symptom than cause of disease. As one meme explains it: "Your fish is sick. Germ theory: isolate the fish. Terrain theory: clean the tank."

A certain schizophrenia afflicts the modern culture of health. On the one hand, there is a burgeoning wellness movement that embraces alternative and holistic medicine. It advocates herbs, meditation, and yoga to boost immunity. It validates the emotional and spiritual dimensions of health, such as the power of attitudes and beliefs to sicken or to heal. All of this seems to have disappeared under the Covid tsunami, as society defaults to the old orthodoxy.

Case in point: California acupuncturists have been forced to shut down, having been

deemed “non-essential.” This is perfectly understandable from the perspective of conventional virology. But as one acupuncturist on Facebook observed, “What about my patient who I’m working with to get off opioids for his back pain? He’s going to have to start using them again.” From the worldview of medical authority, alternative modalities, social interaction, yoga classes, supplements, and so on are frivolous when it comes to real diseases caused by real viruses. They are relegated to an etheric realm of “wellness” in the face of a crisis. The resurgence of orthodoxy under Covid-19 is so intense that anything remotely unconventional, such as intravenous vitamin C, was completely off the table in the United States until two days ago (articles still abound “debunking” the “myth” that vitamin C can help fight Covid-19). Nor have I heard the CDC evangelize the benefits of elderberry extract, medicinal mushrooms, cutting sugar intake, NAC (N-acetyl L-cysteine), astragalus, or vitamin D. These are not just mushy speculation about “wellness,” but are supported by extensive research and physiological explanations. For example, NAC (general info, double-blind placebo-controlled study) has been shown to radically reduce incidence and severity of symptoms in flu-like illnesses.

As the statistics I offered earlier on autoimmunity, obesity, etc. indicate, America and the modern world in general are facing a health crisis. Is the answer to do what we’ve been doing, only more thoroughly? The response so far to Covid has been to double down on the orthodoxy and sweep unconventional practices and dissenting viewpoints aside. Another response would be to widen our lens and examine the entire system, including who pays for it, how access is granted, and how research is funded, but also expanding out to include marginal fields like herbal medicine, functional medicine, and energy medicine. Perhaps we can take this opportunity to reevaluate prevailing theories of illness, health, and the body. Yes, let’s protect the sickened fish as best we can right now, but maybe next time we won’t have to isolate and drug so many fish, if we can clean the tank.

I’m not telling you to run out right now and buy NAC or any other supplement, nor that we as a society should abruptly shift our response, cease social distancing immediately, and start taking supplements instead. But we can use the break in normal, this pause at a crossroads, to consciously choose what path we shall follow moving forward: what kind of healthcare system, what paradigm of health, what kind of society. This reevaluation is already happening, as ideas like universal free healthcare in the USA gain new momentum. And that path leads to forks as well. What kind of healthcare will be universalized? Will it be merely available to all, or mandatory for all – each citizen a patient, perhaps with an invisible ink barcode tattoo certifying one is up to date on all compulsory vaccines and check-ups. Then you can go to school, board a plane, or enter a restaurant. This is one path to the future that is available to us.

Another option is available now too. Instead of doubling down on control, we could finally embrace the holistic paradigms and practices that have been waiting on the margins, waiting for the center to dissolve so that, in our humbled state, we can bring them into the center and build a new system around them.

## The Coronation

There is an alternative to the paradise of perfect control that our civilization has so long pursued, and that recedes as fast as our progress, like a mirage on the horizon. Yes, we can proceed as before down the path toward greater insulation, isolation, domination, and separation. We can normalize heightened levels of separation and control, believe that they are necessary to keep us safe, and accept a world in which we are afraid to be near each other. Or we can take advantage of this pause, this break in normal, to turn onto a

path of reunion, of holism, of the restoring of lost connections, of the repair of community and the rejoining of the web of life.

Do we double down on protecting the separate self, or do we accept the invitation into a world where all of us are in this together? It isn't just in medicine we encounter this question: it visits us politically, economically, and in our personal lives as well. Take for example the issue of hoarding, which embodies the idea, "There won't be enough for everyone, so I am going to make sure there is enough for me." Another response might be, "Some don't have enough, so I will share what I have with them." Are we to be survivalists or helpers? What is life for?

On a larger scale, people are asking questions that have until now lurked on activist margins. What should we do about the homeless? What should we do about the people in prisons? In Third World slums? What should we do about the unemployed? What about all the hotel maids, the Uber drivers, the plumbers and janitors and bus drivers and cashiers who cannot work from home? And so now, finally, ideas like student debt relief and universal basic income are blossoming. "How do we protect those susceptible to Covid?" invites us into "How do we care for vulnerable people in general?"

That is the impulse that stirs in us, regardless of the superficialities of our opinions about Covid's severity, origin, or best policy to address it. It is saying, let's get serious about taking care of each other. Let's remember how precious we all are and how precious life is. Let's take inventory of our civilization, strip it down to its studs, and see if we can build one more beautiful.

As Covid stirs our compassion, more and more of us realize that we don't want to go back to a normal so sorely lacking it. We have the opportunity now to forge a new, more compassionate normal.

Hopeful signs abound that this is happening. The United States government, which has long seemed the captive of heartless corporate interests, has unleashed hundreds of billions of dollars in direct payments to families. Donald Trump, not known as a paragon of compassion, has put a moratorium on foreclosures and evictions. Certainly one can take a cynical view of both these developments; nonetheless, they embody the principle of caring for the vulnerable.

From all over the world we hear stories of solidarity and healing. One friend described sending \$100 each to ten strangers who were in dire need. My son, who until a few days ago worked at Dunkin' Donuts, said people were tipping at five times the normal rate – and these are working class people, many of them Hispanic truck drivers, who are economically insecure themselves. Doctors, nurses, and "essential workers" in other professions risk their lives to serve the public. Here are some more examples of the love and kindness eruption, courtesy of ServiceSpace:

Perhaps we're in the middle of living into that new story. Imagine Italian airforce using Pavoratti, Spanish military doing acts of service, and street police playing guitars -- to \*inspire\*. Corporations giving unexpected wage hikes. Canadians starting "Kindness Mongering." Six year old in Australia adorably gifting her tooth fairy money, an 8th grader in Japan making 612 masks, and college kids everywhere buying groceries for elders. Cuba sending an army in "white robes" (doctors) to help Italy. A landlord allowing tenants to stay without rent, an Irish priest's poem going viral, disabled activists producing hand sanitizer. Imagine. Sometimes a crisis mirrors our deepest impulse -- that we can always respond with

compassion.

As Rebecca Solnit describes in her marvelous book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, disaster often liberates solidarity. A more beautiful world shimmers just beneath the surface, bobbing up whenever the systems that hold it underwater loosen their grip.

For a long time we, as a collective, have stood helpless in the face of an ever-sickening society. Whether it is declining health, decaying infrastructure, depression, suicide, addiction, ecological degradation, or concentration of wealth, the symptoms of civilizational malaise in the developed world are plain to see, but we have been stuck in the systems and patterns that cause them. Now, Covid has gifted us a reset.

A million forking paths lie before us. Universal basic income could mean an end to economic insecurity and the flowering of creativity as millions are freed from the work that Covid has shown us is less necessary than we thought. Or it could mean, with the decimation of small businesses, dependency on the state for a stipend that comes with strict conditions. The crisis could usher in totalitarianism or solidarity; medical martial law or a holistic renaissance; greater fear of the microbial world, or greater resiliency in participation in it; permanent norms of social distancing, or a renewed desire to come together.

What can guide us, as individuals and as a society, as we walk the garden of forking paths? At each junction, we can be aware of what we follow: fear or love, self-preservation or generosity. Shall we live in fear and build a society based on it? Shall we live to preserve our separate selves? Shall we use the crisis as a weapon against our political enemies? These are not all-or-nothing questions, all fear or all love. It is that a next step into love lies before us. It feels daring, but not reckless. It treasures life, while accepting death. And it trusts that with each step, the next will become visible.

Please don't think that choosing love over fear can be accomplished solely through an act of will, and that fear too can be conquered like a virus. The virus we face here is fear, whether it is fear of Covid-19, or fear of the totalitarian response to it, and this virus too has its terrain. Fear, along with addiction, depression, and a host of physical ills, flourishes in a terrain of separation and trauma: inherited trauma, childhood trauma, violence, war, abuse, neglect, shame, punishment, poverty, and the muted, normalized trauma that affects nearly everyone who lives in a monetized economy, undergoes modern schooling, or lives without community or connection to place. This terrain can be changed, by trauma healing on a personal level, by systemic change toward a more compassionate society, and by transforming the basic narrative of separation: the separate self in a world of other, me separate from you, humanity separate from nature. To be alone is a primal fear, and modern society has rendered us more and more alone. But the time of Reunion is here. Every act of compassion, kindness, courage, or generosity heals us from the story of separation, because it assures both actor and witness that we are in this together.

I will conclude by invoking one more dimension of the relationship between humans and viruses. Viruses are integral to evolution, not just of humans but of all eukaryotes. Viruses can transfer DNA from organism to organism, sometimes inserting it into the germline (where it becomes heritable). Known as horizontal gene transfer, this is a primary mechanism of evolution, allowing life to evolve together much faster than is possible through random mutation. As Lynn Margulis once put it, we are our viruses.

And now let me venture into speculative territory. Perhaps the great diseases of civilization have quickened our biological and cultural evolution, bestowing key genetic

information and offering both individual and collective initiation. Could the current pandemic be just that? Novel RNA codes are spreading from human to human, imbuing us with new genetic information; at the same time, we are receiving other, esoteric, "codes" that ride the back of the biological ones, disrupting our narratives and systems in the same way that an illness disrupts bodily physiology. The phenomenon follows the template of initiation: separation from normality, followed by a dilemma, breakdown, or ordeal, followed (if it is to be complete) by reintegration and celebration.

Now the question arises: Initiation into what? What is the specific nature and purpose of this initiation? The popular name for the pandemic offers a clue: coronavirus. A corona is a crown. "Novel coronavirus pandemic" means "a new coronation for all."

Already we can feel the power of who we might become. A true sovereign does not run in fear from life or from death. A true sovereign does not dominate and conquer (that is a shadow archetype, the Tyrant). The true sovereign serves the people, serves life, and respects the sovereignty of all people. The coronation marks the emergence of the unconscious into consciousness, the crystallization of chaos into order, the transcendence of compulsion into choice. We become the rulers of that which had ruled us. The New World Order that the conspiracy theorists fear is a shadow of the glorious possibility available to sovereign beings. No longer the vassals of fear, we can bring order to the kingdom and build an intentional society on the love already shining through the cracks of the world of separation.