"There are so many courageous people just making breakfast in the morning, going to work, taking care of their families, trying to do online teaching. Holy God. I mean, I just wish there was a cosmic scorekeeper that for all of the thousands and billions of people doing their everyday acts of courage that we could track that in the universe. I suspect that what we’re looking at in the sky at night aren’t stars, they are evidence and markers of all those courageous acts that happened earlier in the day." In this insightful and delightfully human conversation, artist Pat Benincasa, and tech leader Sonesh Surana discuss how the era of COVID has dramatically changed our context, necessitated shape-shifting, and spurred us to embrace the power of small acts, and embody the defiant tenderness of surrender. What follows is an edited transcript of the conversation.

We Are A Constellation of Multiple Little Universes: How COVID Changed Our Context

Pat Benincasa: So I woke up this morning and this word was just burning in my head. Sometimes something gets lodged that I can’t shake. And I don’t have a clue where it’s going to go. The word is context. It just seems like one of those ubiquitous everyday words. Everyone uses that word a million times, but it can mean different things. So I had to look up the word. "Context: the circumstances that form the setting of an event, statement or idea in which it can be fully understood." And it seemed to me that COVID has changed our context completely, utterly, totally. What are your thoughts about that?

Sonesh Surana: It was really great to get that refresher of the definition. [At first ] With COVID and the situational context, of the restrictions, the lack of easy connection with other people -- I didn’t realize how much had changed. And I also didn’t realize how much I was taking for granted. It’s taken many months, but it’s allowing me to look with fresh eyes at what I held dear earlier that I probably wouldn’t give a second thought about now, and what I hold dear now in this new situation. And how to accept it, and maybe even enjoy it.

My interactions have been very limited to just my family; my kids and my wife. And you’d imagine that I would know everything that’s happening within the household, within the family. And that I’d have all the context needed. But the mind is such a mysterious vehicle.

Frequently, I’m talking to my kids and I think I know what’s going on. And then I realize-- "Oh my goodness, I have no idea what’s in their head. I have no idea what
they’re feeling." I’m just assuming certain things. And I end up not meeting them where they are.

It’s very humbling to know that with people you want to be close with, you still seem a little bit far away just because there’s this context that you’re not able to wrap your head around, and you’re not opening yourself up to that.

That’s been my experience. That’s what emerges for me Pat.

Pat: I like that. Everybody has their own little universe now in COVID, and it’s their apartment, their house, their pets, their nursing home or whatever their life situation may be. We all now are a constellation of multiple little universes. And this COVID thing has abruptly stopped our river of assumptions.

I think of my daily routine before COVID. I live seven minutes from downtown Minneapolis and 10 minutes from St. Paul, we’re right in between. So when I need to go to the art supply store, the hardware store, you know, in the city and my everyday life, "Oh, out of titanium white. I got to run and get supplies," Or someone calls, "Hey, you want to meet for coffee today?" All these assumptions-- that the Wet Paint store, (that’s the name of the store) will always be there. That the coffee shop is open. And so my universe is based on assumptions, routine, repetition, little things, big things. All of a sudden that stops. It just stops.

And now in the universe called my house, with my partner and four, ill-behaved kitties. And here we are, watching the news and trying to connect and trying to grasp what has happened. So, when you talk about the assumptions, what you thought you knew about your family life, I appreciate it. I appreciate just the life quality of that

And when I think about context, you’re right, it does allow us to see things with new eyes. I appreciate you saying that-- here we have to see things with totally new eyes, but the other side of it is that we now have to be shape-shifters.

COVID has forced us to be shape-shifters. We have to change form and identity constantly within our home and within the digital commons that we go to. None of us saw that coming.

Would you agree with that assessment about shape-shifting?

On Getting Our Egos Out of the Way & Learning to Shape-Shift: How Your Child’s Resistance Might Be Helping You

Sonesh: I think a great degree of that happening, or needs to happen. I don’t know if this is a good example, but I experienced very recently how I needed to shape-shift in an interaction with my son. He’s seven years old, and before COVID one of our beloved activities to do together was to do math puzzles. We would do this maybe a couple of hours a week, split into like 15 or 20 minute chunks. We would just kind of discuss like, "Hey, what would happen if... like, if you had, I don’t know, five beads in a row and you had to color two of them, how many ways could you color two of them?" Just interesting questions and in our discussions we would explore the problem. And ideally the answer would not be as important as the thinking process that went behind it. That’s sort of how we modeled it. It was our time as father and son, kind of hanging out and enjoying each other’s company. The time was limited because
he had school.

Now with COVID, I'm at home, he's at home. We constantly see each other every day. And, we have opportunities to hang out more than we did. So we engage in something that comes very naturally to us, which is these, these math puzzles.

One day I was sitting with my son and he said "Hey, Papa, do you mind if I just do these problems on my own?" And I was like, "Oh, um, yeah, I guess so. Can you, can you tell me why?" And he said, "You know, when you're sitting next to me, I get stressed out and not focused enough." My whole world collapsed there.

I thought this was a very fun activity for him. I thought I was being a great dad. I thought we were building some skills, and I really sat thinking about that for a long time.

I love math. I think math is very essential for everything, you know, whether it's science or architecture or medicine or art. That was my early motivation for doing these math puzzle activities. I wanted to make it fun for him, so he feels like he can engage in math without feeling pressured or thinking it's a boring subject. And I think what I realized is that hidden deep down in me was this desperation for him to be very, very good at it-- so that he could be set for like the rest of his life, whatever he chooses to do, with this foundation. I think that inner drive was somehow altering my behavior in a way that made it a little bit stressful for him, or not as enjoyable. And we kind of moved away from the initial principles.

Sometimes you read something and there's a passage that kind of like sticks with you. And you're like, "Oh my God, this explains my entire universe in this small passage!" And I was lucky enough to find this-- I'm going to read this passage, it's by someone named Ed Sprunger and it talks about resistance.

Consider that resistance might be the child's way of helping you. Resistance maybe the child's way of cooperating by showing you what doesn't work. In this sense it may be a gift. It may be irritating, but it is a gift nevertheless.

And I was like, "Oh my goodness. [My son] is really reaching out to me, and being brave enough to tell me that my presence around him is actually hindering his enjoyment of something." I think that was a moment for me to, I guess, shape-shift, you know? And normally I would go into like, "But why? Explain to me why." Instead I was like, "You know what? Yeah, go for it. Just hang out, do your thing. I'll be pottering about over here. If you need my help, let me know."

That's what he does now. I make up these problems. He does them by himself. And occasionally we'll have these long conversations, like old friends, talking about a problem that he tried to solve on his own. The pride he has, even if the answer was completely wrong, even if the steps were completely wrong, but the pride in the fact that he's putting in his own effort...

I realized, ultimately that kind of the point of education, right? To give people the courage to try things and not be afraid of mistakes. Cause you know, ultimately our whole life is a bunch of mistakes, with a couple of successes that define us. And the fact that we didn't stop, whether by persistence, or by luck, we managed to live through the day to, to have that success-- is a lot of fun.

It was something I took for granted. "Oh, it's family, you know, they're always
going to love having me around. How can they not like my presence?" So I feel like the kind of shape-shifting I need to do, is to allow more space, and to listen when people say, "Hey, your presence is actually causing a hindrance." And that wouldn't have been possible without this lockdown state where we're constantly moving around each other and hanging out each other and, and all of that.

Pat: Boy, that really brings it home. Doesn't it? How do we take our egos out of the way when things happen? And well, that's a tough one. Like not to be crushed that he would say, "I want to do it myself." But the fact of the matter is, you know, as it played out, now you talk like two old friends. Could you have ever envisioned that? Wow.

Sonesh: Yeah. I mean, it's really hard. I think that passage really helped me center myself. And I said, "You know, he needs this, he's asking me for it. Let's give it to him." And now, at the end of the day we talk as peers, as two explorers, each sharing notes of how we thought about a particular problem, and our successes and failures, and the different steps we did. They've been conversations where there have been very few judgments. He's not afraid of my judgment-- where normally I would say, "Oh, why didn't you do that?" Now I don't say those kinds of things. I guess I always aspired to having this kind of a relationship with the kids. And of course, a few conversations doesn't necessarily change the nature of the relationship, but it's a really good shift. I think it's up to both me and him-- and more on me as the adult to keep space for such conversations where we talk as buddies. I wouldn't have imagined that it would happen so soon or in this manner. I've always aspired to it. It's really a blessing.

COVID Revealed Our Malleability: How We Found Ways To Make Love Unstoppable

Pat: If we shift gears from the micro to the macro in a way, when I think of COVID, I think of it as a global forced stop. Like when you're having trouble with your computer, all of a sudden, the world found itself in a global reboot. Everybody had to stop, stay home, limit, who they saw, what we could do, et cetera. And it wasn't just a month or two, it's all year. It was a moment for us to collect ourselves, and really reflect. Sometimes you gotta really be with yourself. So in a way, it's like we had to learn how to be with ourselves in this context of COVID.

And then all of a sudden around us, other things began to happen. George Floyd, the elections, this kind of frenetic swirling around us of all these events that picked up globally. At this moment, this happened and this time, the world heard it, we saw it-- we'd seen it a million times with what's gone on before. But somehow this one, this one connected. People all over the world started to march, or react, make commentary. Something spilled out to the bigger picture.

Sonesh: It was all of these things coming together, right? Police brutality, racism, a political climate instilling the fear of foreign things that was being instilled. It spurred a lot of people to action in many ways. And it is incredible, right? I think people felt that they had the time and space to act longer and to be more sustained in their approach. But I do also remember feeling it's such an incredibly stressful time, incredibly depressing. Like how, what, is there anything we can do? And I think that we all had a different way to deal with it, given the different situations we were in. What was your experience of, of the time then?

Pat: Well, I'm in Minnesota. Yeah. And the world was watching, it was extremely stressful. There were rumors saying that people were planting incendiaries in alleys. And
the city rioting and the outrage that was going on. All of it, it was so real. And I lived through the Detroit riots. I lived through that time period. And fast-forward and, we're there again. But this time it was almost like a global judgment at Nuremberg that people felt the outrage.

Maybe because we had been living for months with worry about COVID, people wearing masks, people, not wearing masks, people who have ailments and compromised immune systems, loved ones, elderly. We're worrying about our loved ones. And maybe that made us more malleable to how fragile and how threatening this situation is, being black while being in America, that this has happened again. And so all of this is to say that COVID maybe opened so many areas for all of us.

So many feelings, fears, and joys around being close to our loved ones. It was about learning how to connect, you know, how do we connect digitally if you can't see your grandchildren? And you're used to seeing them once a week, how do we connect with them? How do we replace those hugs-- how do we do that?

The lack of physical proximity created emotional space digitally, We had to get really creative. To me that was part of COVID too-- people finding ways of making sure love was unstoppable.

I would like just to read a little piece that I wrote in 2016, and I think it fits this. It was after the 2016 election, about six months after it.

"Last night. I had a nanosecond of clarity about this moment of madness. I saw a powerful circular water vortex, swirling down, creating a void. And in that void poured unstoppable new water! And it made sense. All of the evil and awful things happening are not the focus. Those things are finite -- rather, it is the space that evil creates that allows goodness to reconfigure the void."

As we live in this moment of madness, the question is, how do we reconfigure the void? That seems to be a necessary and urgent question.

Sonesh: That is incredible. And it connects so well with something you said earlier, that the concern for our loved ones has made us more malleable. I love the way you said that, because that kind of connects to this shape-shifting, right? We've been talking about how do we shift to this new reality and contribute, in new ways, given the older ways of operating are not available to us. There's something very powerful in what you're saying.

If we can wrap our heads around the context and recognize what these spaces are, what the voids are, and if we discover what can we do to fill them? And what makes it easier or more natural for us to fill it with love?

I think those are the interesting things we can think about, and the interesting discussions we can have at this time, because, yeah, things are moving around. And I think we can make certain choices of how we want to adapt by filling some of those spaces that are being created.

Send Micro Sparks of Light Into the Universe: How We Can Choose to Make a Difference Through the Little Things

Pat: I like how you say that too, that our task becomes identifying those voids. In those
voids too Sonesh, it comes down to one thing: Choice. Do I choose to be a light in this dark? Do I choose to be seduced by the anger and hate, which is very seductive? Do I choose to somehow make a difference? And I'm not talking grandiose, just even in our own headspace, to choose not to be the dark and add fuel and energy to it.

So right now choice seems to be very, very, very important in terms of identifying void. I choose to have my eyes open, I choose to see what's going on. So we identify voids. We make choices of how we choose to be in this new reality. And can we shape-shift towards goodness with all that we've seen, with all that's happened?

We can always make that choice. One day I went outside and I was kind of swearing at the sky. Okay. And I was looking at it saying, "Damn you. You have witnessed everything. You have seen us at our best, at our most vicious and cruel. You've witnessed everything. You silent witness. You're always there! " And I thought, "Yeah, you're always there. You are always there." And then I felt kind of this tenderness towards the sky, that it's been with us this whole time. So how we choose our frame of reference is really critical and it's very tenderly human.

What is an example of a choice that you've made in this COVID era?

Sonesh: I think for me it's making the choice to assume the best intentions in other people, and to respect the struggles they have, regardless of whether I agree with them or not. To respect that they struggle. I think trying to build kinship in that manner, whether it is specifically or just generally and use whatever comes out of that in terms of the feelings to, I guess, in some ways fill the void that we've been kind of talking about, you know, I fill it with a sense of connection. It's hard for me to think about a more pure or greater form of connection than to say, "Look, I may disagree with you, but I respect what you're trying to do. And I respect the situation you're in and, you know, thank you for all your efforts and fighting the good fight, even if we may have done it differently." And I think just that level of connection can be incredibly powerful in bringing people together. How about you?

Pat: Examples of choice that I've made; after the first month of COVID I put up signs in the neighborhood and on my door saying "Thank You to all of you who are delivering and doing things to keep the country running. You are really appreciated." I'm visual. I'm an artist. I live in the land of visual. I got to see things.

The other thing I did was to contact people I hadn't talked to in a long time. I started reaching out, "How are you doing what's happening? How's your family?" These are little things, but I just felt this hunger to want to connect. I was talking to some of these people after a year, but it didn't matter. See COVID is not chronological time. It is emotional time. Chronology has nothing to do with it. So it was like I had to reach out emotionally to connect.

One other thing I did was I made a weekly pandemic graphic that kind of encapsulated the spirit of the week. I'm at now in week 49. I really thought this was not going to be that long, but I did it to help me process. What was this week about? What [have I heard?] What am I feeling? And then I would do this little graphic. So that was my way as an artist to handle it. And the other thing, my social media presence, I frame my posts in positive terms, very mindful. Do I want to throw that? I'm not talking about being Pollyanna. No, no, no. Just choosing not to throw gas on the fire. I don't want throw gas on the fire. We're all just hanging on here. Some days by a thread.
All these little micro things that we can do within the scope of our own personality or who we are-- I think that's our treasure trove of where we dig in to respond. And it is about choice.

Sonesh: There's something very powerful in what you said about the little things. It's the little things that are in our control, and they're manageable. And my guess is that they probably have a way of compounding over time. The benefits can be incredible. Getting in touch with people whom we haven't spoken to in awhile, buying some groceries for the neighbors anytime we're putting in an order or going to the grocery store, you know, simple things like people leaving snacks out for delivery folks. These things are amazing. And they're so simple and there's no reason they need to stop. Even after we get out of this phase-- which I hope we will.

Pat: I had kind of an Aha moment, you know how we do a lot of our life online? I had to call my bank and talk to someone about something. And I had to call Apple for something. And after I'm done, and I thank them, I say, "Now stay well okay?" And there's always this pause and the voice changes on the other side. And I hear, "Thank you, you too. You stay well too." And every time, in that split second, I know all is right in the universe. Two strangers connected.

I agree with you. Sonesh I hope as this ends that we don't forget these little things, these little words of connection. They're so small little acts of kindness. "Thank you for doing that. I really appreciate it."

You know, I think all we ever want in this life is to be appreciated and heard. And in this forced, physical separation, we are finding ways of hearing each other and connecting with each other in ways that I didn't even know I needed to do.

Sonesh: It is these micro sparks or micro moments of relief that we can send out into the universe that can really transform someone's day.

Time, Transformation & Surrender: How to Accept Our Limitations as a Means to Know Our Strength

Sonesh: I'm also curious, just as a thought experiment -- if we were in this COVID situation merely for a month or two-- knowing myself personally speaking, I probably would've made some habit changes, but would have just reverted back to old habits right away. It's actually taken a whole year. Only now feeling like I've kind of got some handle on how to live in this time after a year. And I think all that time was important. I guess behavioral change is so hard, we're trying to change the base version of ourselves. And we've been moving on autopilot for so long. It's like, how do you even change this? It takes such so much work and effort. So time is important. And I hope that people find in their own ways, the time they need to build upon any of the shape-shifting positive habits that they may have developed. Everyone's going to need a different amount of time and I just hope they get what they need, you know? And I think I'm still kind of trying to discover for myself what I need. And it's not super clear, but there's some directions somewhere, you know. I'm curious what you're thinking about this

Pat: In essence. I think it's about surrender. When do we yield to the moment? When do we stop fighting and maybe adapting to this new environment that we're in? A lot of people will say, "Oh, I can't wait for things to get back to normal." I can't
even imagine what normal is going to look like. I really can’t. But it is about surrender. Surrender that means acceptance that this is going on, and then trying to figure out how, can I adapt to this? How do I be in this world? In the fifties, there was a song, "Que sera sera," by Doris Day, the words: "Whatever will be, will be, the future’s not ours to see, que sera sera." Then what, 20 years later "Let It Be," by the Beatles. "When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be." And in that trajectory of "Que sera sera" to "Let It Be," is almost like a playbook for me, it’s not about a fatalism. But learning to find out when to let it be.

Sonesh: Yeah. You know, I think I always found it difficult to understand the trade-off or the balance between the beauty of surrender, yielding to the moment, and the urge to act with passion because that is needed to change as well. I find it difficult to identify moments when it’s important to just let it be versus identifying moments where it’s important to act, as we’ve seen people acting all over the world.

Pat: I think you’re really hitting on something. My constant frame of reference is always defiance, I can’t help it okay. That’s just the way I’m made. I’ve lived long enough that I began to suspect that in surrender, there is defiance. To accept one’s limitations, as a means to know our strengths. When I know my weaknesses, that’s just a parameter to allow my defiance.

Where can I speak, even though I get afraid of things and I don’t want to have controversy? Oh, I hate that kind of thing! But there I am, you know, my mouth starts to open and dear God, I’m going to do it again. And I think that surrender doesn’t mean giving up. I don’t mean it in that sense, throwing up your hands saying, "Oh, no, this is more than I can handle."

It’s saying it is the most tender form of defiance to know when to yield to a moment and when to put your feet on the ground, stand erect and say, no, this is my line in the sand. This is my line. But I can’t draw that line in the sand unless I know my capacity to surrender what it is I need to yield to that is more important than myself. That’s bigger than myself.

That’s really tough. Or to run, to hide, which I do mentally in a nanosecond. I’ll tell you that. I heard someone say once that the word courage in old French cour means heart, of the heart. Courage is of the heart. And I thought, Oh, I like that. It’s not this bravado brass bronze statue. That’s a thousand feet high of some person on a horse.

That’s not courage. Courage is when we step into our everyday-ness and actually hear our son say, “Dad, can I do this by myself?” That’s a magnificent courage. That is the holiness of everyday life. That’s the courage I’m talking about. So yeah, that’s how I see it. The courage of everyday life now, more than ever. There are so many courageous people just making breakfast in the morning, going to work, taking care of their families, trying to do online teaching. Holy God. I mean, I just wish there was a cosmic scorekeeper that for all of the thousands and billions of people doing their everyday acts of courage that we could track that in the universe. I suspect that what we’re looking at in the sky at night are stars, they are evidence and markers of all those courageous acts that happened earlier in the day.

Well have we kind of put context in context Sonesh?
Sonesh: This has been incredible. We started off talking about context, but we realized it’s so connected to understanding what’s happening within and outside. Identifying voids and making choices, what to fill in those voids. And a lot of those choices are these deep moments where you have to sometimes figure out, is this a good time to surrender with recognition of tenderness, or is this a time to act? And it’s a very rich lab in which we are experimenting how to be our best selves. Embracing that is something I’m taking away from our conversation.

Pat: And I’m taking away the delight of your interaction with your family, the contextual basis for your search. You want to be the dad that really understands, and you want to be there. And this little being says, "Okay, dad, that’s great, but I want to do it by myself." What a delight in your response! I mean, I could carry that with me for the rest of the day. I really can.

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Join an intimate circle this Wednesday in conversation with Pat Benincasa on, "The Art of Life in Transition." More details and RSVP info here.