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Pandemic: Where Will It Lead?

Meteors bombarding the dinosaurs into extinction, floods of Biblical proportions, and plague and pestilence that affects entire civilizations are all the stuff of legend, things that you read in books or see in the movies. These are not 'real,' nor do we expect to experience in our lifetimes. Yet, here we are today, in the midst of a global pandemic of epic proportions! The mind boggles at the scope and reach of a tiny little micro-organism, a virus that nobody can see with the naked eye, in fact, a non-living organism that can invade and destroy in such a devastating manner. Never before in our life-times have we seen anything like it, and the last time something even close to it, the Spanish Flu, occurred a century ago. It seems like an impossible situation, but if there is one thing we as human beings have learned from history, it is hope. In spite of the world wide reach of the Coronavirus, the surreal nature of the world we are now living in, and the disruption of everything that we consider normal, we all need to have faith in the tenacity and courage of the human spirit. This spirit, faith in our ability to overcome, and willingness to fight will help us prevail and emerge victorious.

Not much is known about the exact nature of the virus or if and how it made the leap from animals to humans. As so often happens in such cases, there are lots of theories and stories floating around about the origin of the virus, but much of it could be conjecture, or at best an educated guess. Regardless of how it happened, the reality is with us now. There is no denying that the first reported cases were in Wuhan, and what was initially thought of as another variation of the flu, quickly degenerated into a rapidly spreading epidemic of infection that affected scores of people. The most fearsome aspect of the disease was the high mortality rate, and the quickness with which it was able to spread from person to person. Very soon, what was initially

an epidemic in China, began spreading to other nations, and it was not just in the neighboring countries that infection started spreading: it was Italy, then Spain, Iran, and other European countries. Eventually, as scientists began to recognize the global reach of the virus, it spread to the Americas. At this point, it was undeniably a global pandemic. The worst fears of medical professionals had been realized. Nations started quarantining the sick, and then they started clamping down on human interaction, local and international, 'locking' people down in their homes, shutting down stores, and prohibiting travel of all kinds.

The situation quickly became surreal. Staying indoors and avoiding all outside human contact still felt a little bit like an extended weekend at home. It felt somewhat relaxing, but with an underlying feeling that this was not going to be the end of it all. That feeling of disquiet soon became reality, or rather, sur-reality. Who could have imagined a world where everyone had to wear a mask, stay six feet away from outsiders, work remotely as far as possible? A world where it was impossible to imagine going to a movie theater, a football game, or even the grocery stores without a mask on, avoiding people and keeping a distance from everyone else? And, from the standpoint of medical students like me, who were in the thick of clinical rotations as we were finishing up our third year, it was totally unimaginable that we would be forced to finish out the third year and begin our fourth year with remote learning!

As it turns out, we are the lucky ones. Most students continued learning via the internet, and offices quickly transitioned to remote work where possible. But, there are so many professions where remote work is just not possible: construction, fast food, restaurants, movie theaters, and of course, above all, hospitals! Many people have lost their jobs and scores take the risk and go to work with masks and gloves on, risking illness, whether out of necessity or bravery and a sense of duty. It is truly amazing to see these workers, and especially the health

care workers: nurses, doctors, and every type of medical professional possible. These are today's heroes, the workers on the front lines, and the professionals who put society before self. These are the heroes recognized the world over for their heroic sense of duty.

It is no ordinary way in which the world has continued to be grateful to health care workers: that adds yet another surreal aspect to this pandemic. When have we seen scenes of entire populations coming together the way they have over the past few months? The people in Italy, standing on balconies and singing to each other! The people in India standing outside their homes to applaud their medical professionals! The people in England doing the same! The stories and scenes of this experience go on and on. Meanwhile the nurses and doctors and everyone else in the hospitals fight a very real battle against a killer disease about which so little is known! It is truly remarkable and there are so many individual stories of hope, courage, recovery, and heroism that have the power to uplift the human spirit in this time of need.

Humanity and the human spirit are truly at war today. This time, the war is in the streets of the towns and cities, the countries and continents, the entire world. Yet humanity has hope. Human beings are resilient and tough, united in their fight, collaborating to defeat the invisible and intractable enemy. While our health care workers are doing their best to fight the enemy today at the grass roots level, researchers are working hard to find cures and vaccines to guard us in the future. With this level of collaboration and commitment it should only be a matter of time before breakthrough treatments and preventive medicine becomes a reality. Mankind has endured challenges before and will prevail. People have set aside or even forgotten many of the old conflicts and enmities and working side by side, virtually, if not physically, to face this virus.

It does not seem like the world will ever be the same again, at least not for a really long time. But, there will be a new reality, a new awakening, and a newly strong brand of humanity.

It is as if nature is teaching us the lesson of forgiveness and cooperation, not by preaching, but by forcing us to become one. When we do return to some semblance of normalcy, and we will, let us hope for a new beginning, a recognition and memory of the tough times we are going through. Let us work together to make this world a truly better place to live in. Let us forget our differences and realize that, just as the Coronavirus did not differentiate or discriminate, just as science did not distinguish between people as it worked unitedly, we should move forward together. Let us learn from adversity and move on with unity.



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