

Danger and Opportunity

When historians look back in a hundred years time, they won't say that COVID changed the world. But they will say that the world changed. Quite apart from pandemics, we were already on the cusp of a paradigm shift, comparable to the time of the Reformation or the Enlightenment. Historians will look back and see the information revolution, wars in the Middle East from 9/11 onwards, the economic crises in 2008 and beyond, the forest fires and the floods, the mass migration and the refugees. They will note the ever-increasing pressure on the natural world and the increasing gap between rich and poor. And they will (if there are still historians around to do such things) identify the moment in which it all changed - politics, economics, society, and our response to the planetary crisis. The question is: what will that moment look like? Will it be a moment of collective wisdom, leading to careful, compassionate, creative, peaceful and far-sighted changes, or will it be an epoch of madness, leading to ever greater polarisation, to catastrophe and to unprecedented suffering?

If 2020 is remembered for anything, perhaps it will be as the year when the human race was forced to take a collective breath, and, in the stillness, began to pay attention to what it was doing to itself. Or so we can hope.

The old paradigm, rooted in the Enlightenment and the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions, had come to be dominated by centralisation and by polarisation. The two were connected. Its energy provision, manufacture and information depended on large-scale production and distribution, and political power followed. This led to the accumulation of wealth and influence by small groups, and by organised masses in response to this. It was the age of Right or Left, of multi-nationals and state provision. It had become not so much scientific as scientistic: the fiction of Rational Economic Man dominated policy, and what mattered was only what could be measured. Both big business and the state saw themselves as agents only, and treated ordinary people and small communities primarily as passive. The old paradigm had achieved great material advances, and transformed our societies. This had always been achieved at some cost, and now the costs, and the risks, were becoming very great.

The relics of that age still weigh upon us, and still shape our policies. But things are moving, in the provinces and on the margins, and from below, often through networks that cross traditional boundaries. What I call the 'Undergrowth Movement'¹ has been springing up, little noticed until recently (see e.g. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*). COVID has brought it into the public eye (see e.g. Monbiot, 'A Zombie's Life' on attached sheet), but its shoots have been growing for thirty years and more. Undergrowth is organic, flexible, spontaneous, evolutionary, creative, democratic, networked, rooted in the local but embracing the global. It is self-consciously ethical, with ecological health, wisdom, justice and compassion as its watch-words. It makes relationships central. It is exactly, one might argue, the eco-system we need to sustain us through this time of multiple global crises.

¹ 'Undergrowth' conjures up images of green growth, egalitarian, lots of independent small grass-roots shoots, but interconnected - and at the same time an economic pun making a point about folly of aiming at infinite exponential economic 'growth'. Think also of the subsoil, the underpinning, of true growth and health in society.

We are not short of effective new ideas for how to do things: they are spilling out all over the internet (see e.g. the attached links to a variety of TED talks). In many cases, we do not even need to invent projects and practices from scratch: somewhere in the world, an innovative group is already doing what we need on a small scale. What is it then that we need?

We need the **right goals**, and we need general agreement about them. For that, we need a shared vision of what it is to be human.

We need **flourishing communities**, and the human virtues that sustain these. For that, we need strong, healthy families and neighbourhoods.

We need **a healthy environment**, without which we cannot live at all. Specifically, we need to learn to provide our own food, shelter and energy needs while protecting the climate and fostering biodiversity.

We need **wise, humble, and imaginative leadership**, which enables, connects and supports rather than commanding and controlling; a leadership of service rather than ambition. We need to recognise the gifts and contributions of every person and of every small group in our society. We need to connect states, big business, small enterprises, volunteers, families, schools, charities and not-for-profit organisations in a spirit of collaboration and complementarity rather than competition.

We need to commit ourselves **to act decisively, courageously, imaginatively and with self-sacrifice** in order to tackle the multiple crises that face us.

We need **honesty, truthfulness and trust** as the basis for all of the above.

In other words, we need politics and economics to be grounded in ethics, and an ethics that bears remarkable resemblances to the tradition of Catholic Social Thought (as Edward Hadas has shown). Specifically, we need faith and hope as well as charity, for there is no strong reason to think that our collective efforts will be successful, unless they are handed over to and guided by Providence.

Where, then, is the good news from the COVID-19 crisis?

COVID has made us ask what really matters in our lives, and what we are prepared to sacrifice to achieve that. We have come face-to-face with our vulnerability and our mortality, and in our suffering, we have learnt more about the meaning of love.

COVID has sent us back to our families and to our local communities. Parents and children have had time to play and to study together. We have rediscovered our neighbours. We have relearnt the power of volunteering.

COVID has given us cleaner air, cleaner water and a quieter world. It has allowed us to slow down and notice the plants, birds, insects and animals on our doorstep. It has given us the chance to measure the effects of 'business as usual', and taught us both the benefits and the

damage of human intervention in the ecology. It has forced us to ask what all our travel is for, and how far we really need it. It has given us the experience of learning and working from home.

COVID has given us examples of wise, decisive, selfless and energetic leadership. It has also revealed many mistakes and limitations from which we can learn much, mistakes by over-confident leaders who cared too little for the truth, and the limitations of top-heavy centralised organisations. It has also taught us who the key workers really are, and how little we might value them in ordinary times (see ‘Prayers for the Front Line’, ‘Societal Distancing’, and Bregman, *Utopia for Realists*, ch. 7, ‘Why it doesn’t pay to be a banker’). It has seen groups from all sectors of society collaborating to an unprecedented degree.

COVID has shown us how decisively we can act, how many courageous and hard-working people there are in our society, how much we are prepared to sacrifice to face a serious threat. It has shown us thousands of examples of flexible and imaginative reinvention, from fashion designers making scrubs and school-children making visors to sports stadia becoming hospitals and waitresses picking fruit.

COVID has reminded us where bluff, bluster, false news and misplaced optimism will lead, and of the fundamental importance of facing scientific facts, and of honesty and openness about complexity and about hard choices.

COVID has allowed us to pray, as individuals and communities, publicly, openly, without embarrassment. We have been forced to learn humility, to learn the limitations of our capacity to fix our own messes with nothing but our own resources.

Above all COVID has offered us a time to rethink (and ‘repent’, of course, means ‘rethink’). After this, we will have in some way to reinvent our economy, and the daily life in which it is embedded. We can do so carelessly, sliding back into ‘business as usual’, and letting the usual entrenched interests invisibly control our collective decisions. Or we can do so intentionally, reverencing our humanity in its vulnerability and its majesty, embracing the hard choices we need to make about our goals and purposes, and welcoming the opportunity we have had to reflect and to repent, to face facts and to learn new things, to experiences different ways of living. The choice is ours, and that is both a gift and a responsibility. ‘I call to heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and clinging to his voice’ (Deuteronomy 30.19-20).

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