

The coronavirus is the voice of the Earth

Satish Kumar asks what lessons we can learn from this crisis

The year 2020 will be remembered as the year of the coronavirus. It will be remembered as the year of social distancing, lockdowns and staying indoors even when the sun was shining, flowers were flourishing, and birds were singing their sweet songs in the spring.

I was in the fortunate position to be able to take that time of self-isolation as a blessing, a time for spiritual retreat and a time for reflection. I read Rumi and Hafiz. I read Shakespeare's sonnets. I read Rabindranath Tagore. I thought of the word 'quarantine' and its association with Lent: I learned that originally it referred to the period of 40 days that Jesus Christ spent fasting in the desert. For me this time of quarantine became a time of inner solitude.

However, I was fully mindful of the effect of the virus across the world and was sad to see so much suffering. Most of humanity was engulfed in an unprecedented crisis. I am 83 and I have never experienced such a drastic and deadly situation in my entire life. The coronavirus is a show of Nature's power, and is beyond human control. Many people believe that through science and technology we can conquer Nature. But through the coronavirus Nature was telling us loud and clear that talk of conquering Nature is sheer human arrogance. The coronavirus has reminded us in no uncertain terms about the reality of human vulnerability.

Human desire to conquer Nature comes from the belief that humans are separate from Nature and have superior powers. We seem to believe that one way or another we will find technological solutions to subjugate Nature and make her subservient to human dominance.

Rather than looking at the root causes of the coronavirus, governments, industrialists and scientists are looking for vaccines to protect

humans against it. Vaccines may be a temporary solution, but we need to think and act more intelligently and more wisely. Rather than vaccinating against the disease, we need to address the cause. (See Brendan Montague's article *The Virus Is Capitalism*, Issue 320.)

In order to do this, we need to learn to live in harmony with Nature and within the laws of Nature. Humans are as much a part of Nature as is any other form of life. Therefore, living in harmony with Nature is the very first lesson we need to learn from this crisis. It is an urgent imperative of our time.

If these spiritual qualities can be practised in abnormal times, then why not in normal times?

The second lesson is that all human actions have consequences. In the past hundred years, human activities have been the cause of diminishing biodiversity, increasing carbon emissions and greenhouse gases that are causing climate breakdown. Due to human activities the oceans are polluted by plastic, the soil is poisoned with artificial chemicals, and the rainforests are disappearing at an unprecedented speed. All these negative human activities are bound to have disastrous consequences such as floods and forest fires, the coronavirus in the short term, and global heating and climate breakdown in the long term.

Nature is kind and generous, benign and caring. In Nature everything passes. So humanity needs to respond to this crisis positively and use it as an opportunity to redesign our agriculture, our economy, our political systems and our way of life. We need to learn to respect the wilderness. We



need to learn to celebrate the abundant beauty and diversity of life. We need to realise that humans are an integral part of Nature. What we do to Nature we do to ourselves. We are totally interconnected. Coronavirus has shown us that we are interrelated. We depend on each other. We are members of one Earth community and one Earth family.

If this understanding, this worldview, becomes an integral part of our consciousness and an organising principle of mainstream society, we will have different priorities and different values. Instead of economic growth at all costs, we will pursue the growth in wellbeing of people and the health of planet Earth.

Going back to business as usual after the coronavirus should not be an option. Before this pandemic, society was gripped by the pandemic of a greed virus. And because of this, forests have died, lakes and rivers have died, species have died, children have died, people living in poverty have died, victims of war have died, refugees have died. Death and destruction have been the consequence of the greed virus.

In a recent *Guardian* article, poet and novelist Ben Okri wrote: “The real tragedy would be if we come through this pandemic without changing for the better. It would be as if all those deaths, all that suffering ... would mean nothing.”

A crisis is an opportunity. In the evolutionary process of Nature there have been many crises. Life has evolved through struggle over a long period of geological time. Who knows? – maybe this painful pandemic can give birth to a new consciousness, a consciousness of the unity of life, a consciousness of caring and sharing, a consciousness of love.

We have already seen some wonderful signs of this. Doctors, nurses and carers have put themselves in harm’s way. They have given their lives to serve the victims of the virus. They are shining examples of selfless service. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary people have volunteered to support the National Health Service. And countless numbers of helpers in local communities have been caring for old people and sick people. The British government even suspended all fiscal rules to help individuals, communities, charities and businesses. There has been an outpouring of solidarity, generosity, mutuality and reciprocity. People have experienced a sense of deep belonging, profound gratitude and unconditional love from many directions.

Russians sent planeloads of medical equipment to Italy. Chinese were doing the same for Serbia. Animositities have been forgotten. Nations have been cooperating, helping and supporting each other in the spirit of mutual aid rather than the usual competing and fighting.

If these spiritual qualities can be practised in abnormal times, then why not in normal times? If we cooperate and collaborate, love and respect in normal times, the abnormal conditions are less likely to occur.

In addition to this outpouring of the human spirit, we have seen a reduction in pollution and a partial recovery of the natural environment. Clear blue sky has been experienced over the cities of Bombay and Beijing. Carbon emissions have gone down, and people are able to breathe pure air again. If we can have a good environment in abnormal times, why not in normal times?

Can we dare to hope that individuals, communities and countries will learn to love each other, look after their environment and create a new world order after this dreadful virus has passed? The Indian writer Arundhati Roy says: “Historically pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

The lockdown in so many countries, large and small, has shown that governments, businesses and ordinary people can come together and take a big economic risk in the interest of greater good – in this case the health of the whole of society.

This experience should give us the confidence and courage to take bold actions to safeguard the health of Nature and the biosphere. We must remember that we are sitting on a branch of Nature. If we cut the branch upon which we are sitting, we are bound to fall. Therefore, once this crisis has passed, let us act together to care for the planet and for people. R

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