

## Pandemic and its Discontents, An Opinion

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### Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc in our society and the rest of the world unfortunately. Its violent impact is felt everywhere, cutting like a chainsaw right through the fabric of our healthcare and political systems. It seems like we can't get rid of this rabid virus. It has taken a huge toll on us, especially on our mental and emotional well-being. It's manifesting as anxiety, depression, grief, obsession, substance abuse, bursts of rage and anger, and domestic violence. We see the emergence of these mental health crisis in wars, desperate refugees fleeing from their native countries, major climate and environmental calamities, etc. Some of these mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and PTSD can be short lived if timely treatment is provided (which is, unfortunately, uncommon), but many persist for life and can afflict a whole generation. One of the hardest things in life is to live with despair without a way out to relieve those stresses, and COVID-19 and its many consequences is there on the top of the list.<sup>1</sup>

Microorganisms, in general, have some affinity

to a particular organ. In this case of SARS-Cov-2, the virus has a predilection for the respiratory system (especially the lungs) but it's not simply limited to that domain. However, once it gains its entrance by attaching itself via some probes on the cell's surface, it can lead to an ARDS-like clinical presentation leading to the immediate necessity and need for the nonstop availability of ventilators, driving up a bidding war of a commodity which was never in abundant supply to begin with. Additionally, other major organs (such as the brain) and systems (blood vessels, for example) are damaged too, creating stroke like situations, and the effects are multifactorial. It's typical for microorganisms to find a weak link on a cell surface, and like an invading army, they breach the castle wall or, in this case, the cell membrane. Once the entry has taken place, like a violent invading army, it plunders the inner machinery of the cell and leaves the host cell by exploding it like a city being razed.<sup>2</sup>

The damage that COVID-19 is doing is not just physical but also psychological, with an additional layer of complication (i.e. it's also affecting those who not directly impacted by this illness). These bystanders

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are—per the 24/7 news cycle, via social media, or just by hearsay—spectators to devastation all around the whole world. This makes most of us feel quite vulnerable and paranoid. Most of us have weak links in our emotional and psychological framework, and this virus has found two of those vulnerabilities and has gained entrance into our mindset and our thought process. So, what are those weak links in our state of mind? There are two notable vulnerabilities groomed and honed to perfection over the course of decades of collective and individual life experiences and have attained the status of archetypes. Those are our very organized approach in conducting our daily lives and other is our over-reliance on technology in our daily living. So, let's take these two weak mental and emotional links one at a time and see where they lead us to.<sup>3</sup>

Take the overly organized behavior. We are repeatedly told to be organized in order to maximize our efficiency and profits while minimizing the waste. In general, this is a good thing, and there is definitely some wisdom and utility to it. However, we have collectively taken this message too far, past the goal line and even beyond the stadium doors—an unnecessary and counterproductive effort. We have given elementary school students—children who still struggle to button their coats, zip up their jackets, and tie their shoelaces—planners to write down their daily routine like a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. We organize our rooms, our bathrooms, our desks, our drawers, our closets, and on and on and on to the point where we have actually forgotten why we are we doing it in the first place. And that is not enough for us. Humans are being asked repeatedly to act like animals—tiger of this or a lion of that or, even worse, be an automobile like a Ferrari or a Jaguar—in the name of this being excessively organized and efficient and at times just to keep up the appearances.<sup>4</sup>

So, how does this overtly organized way of life affect us? It creates an unspoken and unwritten rule for most of us called “a timeline commitment”—there is predictable beginning and an end for everything that we do. We are expected to start and finish, and it's the finishing that gives us the most joy. We are asked to quantify the finish, and if we can't, then we are asked to use expensive technologies and expertise that can

quantify it for us. We are so used to it now that we are using highly specialized cameras to see if the toe of a football player is off the line or if the bent of the neck of a runner is edging just a millimeter in front of their opponents or not—the photo-finish approach to defining the gold standard in distinguishing the winners from the losers.<sup>5</sup>

Then this pandemic of COVID-19 happened, and there's no end in sight (at least in the short-term). Even when timelines are suggested, they are all-over and contentious. It seems that this virus at least for now is immune to any quantifiable timeline. Time is immaterial to this pandemic. It's like a we are inside of a computer game: the better we play, the harder it gets as if actively trying to prevent our victory. The SARS-Cov-2 virus is like an A.I.—a biological A.I. It is predetermining our moves and improvising its own skills, and it is always ahead of the curve. And we mortals want (or, rather, desperately need) to end all this madness. In our daily planner—be it in the fancy leatherbound book or the super technological devices we have—we just can't schedule the conclusion to this pandemic. It is driving all of us crazy because all we want from our governments, our academics, our physicians, our scientists, our economists, our religious leaders, our philosophers, and our policymakers is an end date, so all or most us can return to our highly organized lives with our days planned from beginning and an end. However, despite our best efforts no one can provide that timeline within a reasonable estimate. And yes, some scientists are trying to suggest some reasonable end to this pandemonium, but we keep rejecting it as doesn't fit our mental framework of acceptable standard of an organized behavior.<sup>6</sup>

When will this lockdown end? When is the treatment going to arrive? When is the vaccine going to be available for us? We just don't know. We have become like children on a long car ride with our parents, constantly asking “are we there yet?” We are given an imperfect timeframe by our experts based on their best assessments so far, but our candidly organized minds want a concrete timeline that we can write down in our daily planners. But this virus has unilaterally determined when it is going to end its plunder, and it's not sharing this with anyone. It has breached us, but we can't breach it. What a

demoralizing scenario, an entity that we can't see, feel, or know is determining our future. The screen goes dark from here, and this unnerving sense of darkness is manifesting as anxiety, depression, paranoia, grief, substance abuse/dependence, anger, rage, and despair.<sup>7</sup>

The other weak link that this virus has found amongst us is our over-indulgence and morbid reliance on technology. We depend on tech so much that we grew independent from each other. We became the central cast of our own stories no matter how irrelevant that story is. We have started to live in our own worlds where we are the product and the customer at the same time. We thought that we finally don't have to deal with people anymore. We can live our lives in our echo chambers and live happily ever after. We leased our ourselves to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, or whatever the next gig is. We indulge ourselves by watching our own lives akin to the mythological Greek's Narcissus. We created comfortable dwellings for ourselves, and with this mindset, we can exit indefinitely within these walls of confinement.<sup>8</sup>

Then this pandemic happened, and it actually pushed us and locked us all inside our homes. For our comfort we call this "social distancing," but we are too afraid to leave now. Yes, in the absence curative treatment or vaccine, this is one of the most effective and helpful tools along with the masks and regular hand washings, which have helped us to slow down the spread of the virus, but it is not sitting well with us, this social distancing. In a classical psychoanalytical insightful awakening, we just came to this sudden realization that being homebound with all our tech gadgets is good for nothing. All those alter egos that we created for ourselves of ourselves in the social media is not making us happy or secure any more. We are lonely, fearful, sad, and deeply bored, staring outside our windows and craving human interaction. The empty streets, the closed shops, the eerie quietness is driving us to the brink of insanity. We are in the midst of the battle going on between the Freudian Eros and Thanatos, and we are forbidden by this stark, brutal (yet unseen) enemy to act on our own pleasure principles. If this continues and there is no timeline, we can sink into deep paranoia and can lose touch with reality. Because

our sense of self and well-being is mostly dependent upon human interaction, all those people with whom we interact (even if briefly and hurriedly) keep us sane and connected to ourselves and the rest of the world.<sup>9</sup>

The virus has sunk into our system, and the million-dollar question is how we can purge it out in order to lead a more adaptive and content life internally and with the rest of the world. So, is there a bright light on the horizon? Yes, there is hope and even more than hope because crisis also brings teachable moments. A very big lesson to learn is that catastrophes like this pandemic knows no boundaries, so we must address this as a global problem. There are moments in our lives far bigger than us, our culture, our geographies, etc., and this is definitely one of them. An empathic understanding of the situation, coordinating efforts, and sharing resources can and will bring this to an end or, at least, under control. Organizations like the WHO need to be better funded and should function above all affiliations. We should also avoid naming microbes by their city or country of origins, so if there is a breakout of an infection in any part of the world, then that country and its government sends out the SOS signal quickly without facing the fear of being stigmatized. Another wise thing to do is not to solve the health crisis with political ideologies but with science and with science only. This also includes having the ability to provide healthcare without any discrimination. The healthier we are, both physically and psychologically the more productive we are economically, both as a nation and also as the citizens of the world. We have made some strides to have some breakthroughs in terms of treatment and vaccinations, but it's an understandably slow process. If we continue to do what is mentioned above and then some more, we shall reach the end of it sooner or later.<sup>10, 11, 12, 13, 14</sup>

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