

Time to Re-think Our Future

A friend called last month informing me that the 55th reunion for my high school class, planned for the second week in September, has been postponed. The new plan is a joint reunion next year with the class of 1966. Although my home town is in the second most populous county in the state of South Dakota, there are only 26 confirmed cases of COVID-19 at this writing. The planning committee is exercising an abundance of caution.

Samuel Johnson famously stated, “[W]hen a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” So, too, it concentrates the mind when those who are in a high-risk age cohort know there is a pandemic of unknown duration caused by a virus that is novel, widespread, and potentially deadly.

Few among us have not spent time recently thinking about the threat of COVID-19. We are understandably wary of this disease, the likes of which we have never experienced first- or even second-hand. It’s a time of uncertainty, anxiety, and legitimate rage at the failures of certain parties within government and business who have shown themselves less concerned about preserving human life than exploiting this national and global crisis for their own benefit.

I suspect few of us will emerge from this crisis without some traces of PTSD. The trauma will not dissipate overnight. Nor will the harmful material effects.

But there is a dimension to this crisis that needs to be brought into clearer focus. In ways that must become more obvious, the quicker the better, we are experiencing a foretaste of what a positive new normal may look like for human civilization. I’m not thinking about the social distancing or the loss of employment and income that currently weighs upon us. I hope we will be able to resume intimate social contact before the summer is over – though there is no guarantee. I hope that national and global economies will not become so depressed that bankruptcy, poverty, homelessness, and starvation become more commonplace.

However, if people think that recovery must mean a resumption of previously prevailing patterns of consumption, travel, and social policy, the lessons of the moment will be lost. It should be apparent that we Americans buy all kinds of things we hardly need. Manufacture of these things invariably takes a huge toll on our environment. Our diets teem with foods that require much more land, water, and/or energy to produce and transport than equally nutritious alternatives. We entertain ourselves with steak dinners, cruises, and fossil-fueled travel tours that are no longer affordable luxuries. To be sure, we may have the money to pay for them, but we do not have the means to compensate for the toll there are taking on our natural habitat. One silver lining of the pandemic is the clearing of skies over large cities and populous countries like India and China.

For those in my age cohort, in particular, “It’s time to re-think our bucket lists.” It’s time to concentrate our minds on more creative and less costly ways to fulfill our aspirations, to spend our days of leisure, to allocate our resources for the benefit of others. Some economies will collapse if and when we start spending more wisely, but others can burgeon as resources are devoted to renewable energy developments, health care advances, infrastructure repairs and

improvements, better child care and housing, expanded educational opportunities, new continuing education and recreation opportunities, and a vast array of additional and alternative ways to enable human beings to flourish and make our life together more venturesome, encouraging, and rewarding.

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