

Covid-19: there's a whole lot of pain!

.... But is there also some gain?

After a while we tend to switch off. The Corona news becomes a repeat of Syria or Afghanistan: like watching a despairing Mexican soap, where the bad gets worse each day! This Corona soap is all about spiraling infection rates and mounting death tolls, inadequate hospitals and confused politicians; the first season set in China and now the current season in Europe; it looks like the third is a grand finale in the USA.

Could we imagine anything worse than this? Perhaps Idlib, where hospitals are blitzed, there's no food and kids freeze to death on the streets, might just pip Covid-19. But it would be a close call; at least in Idlib you can know and see your enemy. This Corona enemy is invisible! It's impossible to predict how and when it's going to get us: maybe a best friend who travelled, money at the checkout, or the door handle on our apartment block! Who can tell?

But get past all the doom and gloom and brain-numbing stuff – *'Worse than wartime!'* *'Eclipsing the Financial Crisis!'* *'More unemployed than The Great Depression!'* – then look more carefully at some of the positive impacts the pandemic is having on our lives. If we can run on that parallel track for just a little while, we begin to see a glimmer of hope, where the tragic pains of Covid-19 could actually lead to multifaceted gains for communities, and our world, in the future.

For a start, this microscopic bug has allowed us to value our loved ones and to cherish the irreplaceable role that older ones especially, play in our day-to-day lives. It has enabled us to understand and appreciate the enormous contribution that health personnel and many other 'essential workers' make to our communities, year-in-year-out. And our

eyes have been opened to the hitherto unheralded worth of contact within our communities: meeting friends and extended family, hugging and kissing, sharing a beer or a soft drink, travelling together, discussing and debating the ways of the world. Covid-19 has shown us what life would be like on an alien planet of closed-in confinement, while of course, we all crave to be back in the open-air world we know and love.

History tells us that moments of crisis bring out the best in people. We are not sheep; we are born with a brain to develop ways that meet challenges. So just as civilian factories assumed the manufacture of tanks and planes during WW2, today our makers of vacuum cleaners are designing respirators, dressmakers fashioning face masks and liquor producers bottling sanitizers. It shows the ingenuity of humans in the face of adversity, almost as if heeding President Roosevelt's words from 1941, when he said: "Powerful enemies must be out-fought and out-produced." Perhaps we all thought these values were dead and buried in this market-led mindset of the 21st Century; but no, in truth they were just slumbering away, waiting to be re-invigorated by our encounter with Covid-19.

In the UK, the capability of the National Health Service has been magnificently bolstered by tens of thousands of retired doctors, nurses and ancillary staff, along with final year students from medical and nursing schools, volunteering to join the frontline fight against Covid-19. This means in effect enrolling to be in close proximity to people who have contracted a deadly disease, which demonstrates an incredibly selfless approach to support for communities and fellow citizens. In addition, more than half a million Britons have volunteered for support roles, such as transporting patients and delivering meals; admittedly some may see the advantage of being able to escape the dreaded lockdown, but none-the-less it's a magnificent response from a population, who just a few months back were almost at war with each other, over Brexit!

To top it all off and to show how Covid-19 had re-united the country (a result seemingly impossible for politicians to achieve), my daughter sent me this message from London:

“The most amazing thing happened just now in the UK – all over the country people looked out of their windows and balconies to clap for the NHS, for the work they’re doing. My whole street was applauding! Amazing stuff!”

There’s another incredibly important way in which novel corona highlights a new and better direction for humankind to follow. Satellite imagery from Wuhan and Italy shows a marked difference - comparing 2020 with 2019 – in levels of toxic gases related to exhaust emissions (and particularly the very noxious gas, nitrogen dioxide). The inference is that this disparity is due to the ‘lockdowns’ imposed and the subsequent marked reduction in all types of fossil fuel-powered vehicles. Nitrogen dioxide aids global heating and contributes to acid rains which effect the planet’s biodiversity and our own human health! We could choose to ignore this, or we could use the information - firmly underscored by Covid-19 - to steer us in the direction of fewer vehicles and more renewable energies, giving cleaner air and a healthier existence for flora and fauna (including ourselves!).

But getting back to more homely aspects, just an evening or two ago I sat down to watch my usual spine-chilling diet of Covid-19 News and for some unknown reason, switched to ABC news, broadcasting from Ohio. Surprisingly, it wasn’t spine-chilling at all, in fact almost the reverse: calming and uplifting. It was also nothing like the confused messages that emit from the White House day after day, but very organised and carefully designed to meet the needs of worried viewers. *“How will this be remembered by our kids?”* said the Ohio First Lady. *“That they got to spend a whole lot of quality time with their mums and dads?”* She went on to talk about the sorts of things we could do when we’re in lockdown with our children: great ideas and activities. Not at all what we’ve come to expect from First Ladies; more like a favourite aunt talking to her loved ones.

This Ohio experience left me with an unusual feeling, that in spite of all they might have to face in the near future, some people in the United States were able to dig deep and

bring out the best in an extraordinarily humane way: totally the opposite to any feelings generated by watching or listening to their president.

That night I went to sleep thinking that as well as an awful lot of tragedy, Covid-19 actually brought some hope too, which revolved around a set of values that seemed almost lost to history; lost in a sea of Trump and Brexit, market-driven growth and building walls. And then in my dreams I saw a multitude of Chinese shouting from their balconies 'We shall overcome' and people clapping and banging their saucepans up and down the streets of London, while an Italian tenor delighted his apartmented audience with a voice that soared into the night skies of Bergamo!

The next day I went about the duties in my locked-down home with renewed vigour: I had seen clear examples from China, Italy, the United Kingdom and USA of wonderful actions in the face of incredible hardship and fear. And that's when I sat down to write this piece, to try and show that there is life after Covid-19 ... and if we want it to be, it can be a better life than the one before.
