

Screw This Virus!

We had to be set apart in order to feel together.



By David Brooks

Opinion Columnist

- March 19, 2020

-

Screw this virus. Screw this virus that is already ravaging families, burying people in the hard isolation of the same four walls, leaving waitresses in anguish about how they're going to pay the rent. If you don't have a little hate in your heart toward this thing, you probably aren't motivated enough.

While we're at it, screw certainty. Over the past few weeks I've been bingeing on commentary from people predicting how long this is going to last and how bad it's going to be. The authors seem really smart and their data sets seem really terrible.

I'm beginning to appreciate the wisdom that cancer patients share: We just can't know. Don't expect life to be predictable or fair. Don't try to tame the situation with some feel-good lie or confident prediction. Embrace the uncertainty of this whole life-or-death deal.

There's a weird clarity that comes with that embrace. There is a humility that comes with realizing you're not the glorious plans you made for your life. When the plans are upset, there's a quieter and better you beneath them.

We are all seeing the world with plague eyes now. We're all going through the same experiences. People in Seoul, Milan and New Jersey are connected by a virus that reminds us of the fundamental fact of human interdependence. Most of us are self-distancing at the same time. Most of us are experiencing the same pause in normal life, undergoing deeper reflections inspired by that pause,

experiencing the same anxieties and fears, reading the same memes. So many human universals.

The great paradox, of course, is that we had to be set apart in order to feel together. I've been writing about the social fabric for years now, but you really see it only after you've lost it.

All the little acts of social contact we took for granted now seem like candy. I miss choruses and sports bars, the weird way we all used to stare straight ahead in crowded elevators.

Judging from my social network, the absence of social connection is making everybody more ardent for it. People are geniuses at finding ways to touch each other even when they can't. On Twitter I saw a picture of a house where an older lady was self-isolating. Two neighborhood kids put on a cello concert on her front porch. Have you noticed that music and art are already filling the emotional gaps left by the absence of direct human contact?

Through plague eyes I realize there's an important distinction between social connection and social solidarity. Social connection means feeling empathetic toward others and being kind to them. That's fine in normal times.

Social solidarity is more tenacious. It's an active commitment to the common good — the kind of thing needed in times like now.

This concept of solidarity grows out of Catholic social teaching. It starts with a belief in the infinite dignity of each human person but sees people embedded in webs of mutual obligation — to one another and to all creation. It celebrates the individual and the whole together, and to the nth degree.

Solidarity is not a feeling; it's an active virtue. It is out of solidarity, and not normal utilitarian logic, that George Marshall in "Saving Private Ryan" endangered a dozen lives to save just one. It's solidarity that causes a Marine to risk his life dragging the body of his dead comrade from battle to be returned home. It's out of solidarity that health care workers stay on their feet amid terror and fatigue.

Some things you do not for yourself or another but for the common whole.

It will require a tenacious solidarity from all of us to endure the months ahead. We'll be stir-crazy, bored, desperate for normal human contact. But we'll have to stay home for the common good. It's an odd kind of heroism this crisis calls for.

Those also serve who endure and wait.

I wonder if there will be an enduring shift in consciousness after all this. All those tribal us-them stories don't seem quite as germane right now. The most relevant unit of society at the moment is the entire human family.

All those burn-it-down/destroy-the-system/anti-establishment tirades ring a little hollow, too. It's not the angry outsiders who are protecting us right now, it's the Establishment.

The whole culture of autonomy seems immature, too: I'm free to be myself! The people who are out there doing their own thing are at Spring Break threatening the lives of the most vulnerable around them.

We'll need a great reset when this is all over. We need to start planning a great social festival and ask the obvious questions: Why did we tolerate so much social division before? Why didn't we cultivate stronger social bonds when we had the chance?

In the meantime, as someone on my Twitter feed observed: Airport rules apply. If you want a beer at 9 a.m., go for it.