

Opening Words

As the only single member of the Apple Family on Zoom, Marion says “I have all of a sudden realized ‘I have not touched another human being for over three months, not a hand or a shoulder, or even bumped in the grocery store. We are that careful. We are told to be.’ That is what I realized there in my bathtub. ‘This is what I am missing. This is not the same.’ Isn’t that touching?”

“And So We Come Forth: A Dinner in Zoom,” Richard Nelson

Reflection: Life After Covid-19

Life after COVID-19..... Sounds very reassuring. But on Friday, July 17, the New York Times reported 75,600 new cases in the United States -- a doubling over the previous 23 days and a new record -- following a period of declining new cases in late May and early June. This turnaround resulted from a number of states, especially in the south and west of the country, opening prematurely despite their metrics indicating a pandemic that was far from being controlled. The result has been increased infection, hospitalization, and mortality, accompanied by enormous pressure on supplies of medical resources. Furthermore, in most instances, this was not a second wave of the disease but an extension of the first wave to states that had been bypassed the first time around. Bringing the pandemic under control in these states will require measures similar to those used in the states that were successful with

social distancing, use of face masks, hand washing, testing, isolation of suspected cases, and lockdown of much of the general population. Yet most people acknowledge that these are only temporary measures, with high economic and social costs. And we are still far from being out of the woods. Successive waves of the disease are likely to ensue, though hopefully they will be better controlled and decreasing in intensity.

But what of the future. What will the world look like when the pandemic as we now know it has abated? Will the world have changed and, if so, how? What will this depend on? Will we have choices? We do not really know what the changes will be, but we have some clues. One is experience over the past few months of dealing with this scourge; the other is history with previous plagues.

Lessons from Our Experience with the COVID-19 Pandemic

There are a number of important characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic and our attempts to deal with it that we need to understand.

1. It is capable of spreading very rapidly, as it did in the United States shortly after it was first introduced from Europe and Asia. One of the reasons for this spread was the high mobility of our population.
2. The disease can be a silent intruder. The best research suggests that actual infections are perhaps ten times the number of infections that are identified through testing of those who have symptoms or have been close to those with symptoms. These silent stalkers are

still capable of transmitting the disease, the extent to which can only be identified by testing the general population.

3. There is increasing evidence that the virus can spread via breath aerosols exhaled by those who are infected. This extends the range and duration of their contamination beyond what scientists thought possible via dissemination of droplets by coughing and sneezing.
4. Antibody testing has been seriously compromised by the failure of the Food and Drug Administration to control the dissemination of testing methods that have not been properly evaluated.
5. Tracing of infection has encountered strong resistance from those being traced, partly because of its violation of privacy and partly because, in the absence of direct evidence of infection, people do not want to be isolated. It can work, but this requires many trained tracers, who have the time to spend in sustained contact with those being traced, tested, and isolated. This is only possible if the disease is already pretty well under control.
6. There are many problems associated with the high incidence of infection in hot spots such as prisons, elderly homes, disadvantaged neighborhoods, etc. These problems require a comprehensive range of solutions to deal with the underlying problems putting people at higher risk. These involve decreasing poverty, less crowded housing, safer public transportation, better and cheaper health care, drug addiction programs, more

enlightened criminal justice, and community action programs, to name just a few

7. General acceptance of the voluntary use of measures to control the disease, such as those cited above, varies enormously across different segments of the US population, though that acceptance appears to increase once the full impact of the disease has been felt. Ways must be found to create a culture of safety first.
8. Our federal system of government is not structured to effectively enforce the use of mandatory control measures. For example, in Massachusetts, we have limited capacity to control the entry of people from other states where the pandemic is more rampant.

So what can we learn from our experience thus far?

First, that we are probably going to have to live with this and other pandemics for a long time to come. Even if a vaccine is developed in record time and is accepted by enough people so that we can develop herd immunity, one of the consequences of our current way of life is a continual need to remain vigilant and to maintain and pay for a health infrastructure that can protect us from the ravages of a wide variety of pandemic diseases coming from different sources. We already knew this was necessary; we just did not pay enough attention.

Second, there is evidence that people are willing to make some life-style changes relatively easily. Certainly, there are many who have found

working from home and maintaining contact via Zoom meetings not to be a huge burden. It reduces time spent in transit, increases the possibility of paying less for housing, and focusses attention on different methods of socializing. For some of us older folks, we even hear better at online meetings. The ultimate impact on urban geography remains to be seen, but at least the effects of the pandemic are not all negative. So how do we take advantage of this?

Third, as shown by the opening words for this service, we do not know very much about the impact on human beings of being relatively isolated from one another. Even face masks hide smiles and other human expressions. We see some manifestations of the consequences of this isolation in well-attended, peaceful demonstrations, increased urban crime, and frustration with business as usual. But where all this will lead we do not yet know.

Fourth, we know a lot about how people act in the summer, when restrictions are less onerous outdoors. But what will happen next winter, when the chances of contagion will rise in more closed environments? What will be the impact of opening schools?

Fifth, there seems to be a greater sense of community during the pandemic, that “We are all in this together,” which the World Health Organization strongly endorses. There is also a sense that many of the people who have carried the heaviest burden are those who have had the

fewest advantages in terms of incomes, financial resources, risk of infection, etc. There is also a perception among many that this must change. But not among all. How do we arrive at consensus?

Lessons from Previous Pandemics

The Earth has suffered numerous and, one might say, almost continuous pandemics ever since its humans have crowded into cities. But immunities have been acquired, to a greater or lesser degree, that enable survivors to carry on and to multiply. Where these immunities have not existed, such as within the Native American population when it first came into contact with Europeans, the results have been devastating.

One of the most important of these pandemics was the Bubonic Plague, which first swept across Europe from 1347 to 1350 and killed one-third to one-half of the human population. So sudden was the onset of this plague and so devastating were the results that people felt helpless to defend themselves. Most of the population was impoverished and lived in squalid, dirty conditions, often in densely packed urban areas.

An important example is the cities of Italy, which were a major channel by which the Plague arrived in Europe, and from which it spread like wildfire to nearby small towns and villages. Trade stagnated, businesses failed, and unemployment rose. This resulted in social breakdown.

Boccaccio in the Decameron describes people leaving their occupations,

avoiding the sick to the maximum extent possible, and pursuing lives of wild excess because they all expected to die.

The magnitude of this catastrophe was so great that it had far-reaching longer-term effects. With a drastic decline in the labor force, wages rose, and survivors experienced a higher standard of living than ever before. This encouraged structural shifts towards industry and labor-saving technology. Serfs were able to purchase their freedom, especially in the north of Italy, where a more sophisticated economy emerged. However, many church clerics who had perished were replaced by poorly trained and corrupt men, which disillusioned parishioners and led eventually to abandonment of the church and increased secularization of Italian society. But out of this chasm emerged the Renaissance, with its emphasis on human values and experience rather than religion. People were no longer willing to accept the status quo. Italy became a much less rigid and stratified society. Authors, painters, musicians, and scientists turned to depicting the joys of life and the beauty of nature. They danced.

What Might We Learn?

There are many lessons that we might learn from the from these experiences with pandemics, but we will have to focus on just a few.

One is the importance of realizing that we are all in this together. The rich and powerful cannot escape it, as with the nobility and clergy in

Italy. We must accept that we are each other's keepers. A sense of community is vital.

The pandemic provides us with yet another example of the vital role that can be played by knowledge and data. Our ability to surmount the inevitability of pandemics is manifest. But there is no room for political favoritism, for splitting blue and red over false premises. And beyond pandemics there looms the specter of climate change. Perhaps this is just a rehearsal.

This particular plague has hit us just at the spots that are weakest. It has revealed our divisions and shown us our morally inarticulate culture, which has condoned a history of racism and allowed growing inequality to prevail.

But it has also allowed us to look afresh at our situation and to say, "that's enough." The bravery of our children has led the way. We have become much more intentional about our human connections. Everyone hungers for tighter bonds and deeper caring.

"We will look back on this as one of the most meaningful periods of our lives.... Already, there is a new energy coming into the world...with all those online images of people finding ways to sing and dance together across distance."

Dirck Stryker, July 18, 2020