

## Some Short Personal Reflections on Our Current Condition

It's still in my diary. *Thursday May 7<sup>th</sup>: Guild lecture, 'Humility'*. There's plenty of other entries like that for the months to come. Plans and commitments made in that rapidly-fading era I now think of as B.C. (I'll let you work that out for yourselves, though it shouldn't take long).

It all puts me in mind of that old Yiddish joke: "How do you make God laugh? Tell Him your plans". Which is no joke really, more a piece of longstanding Jewish folk wisdom born out of the recognition – and for diasporic Jews this was historically rooted, as well as being a piece of universal and existential truth – of how little control we have over how our lives unfold.

In spite of the insights and understanding we can glean and develop from various religions, spiritual traditions and psychological explorations – and all the paths they open up which help us deepen and nurture our appreciation of life, and which might be crucial to our individual well-being – we know (but are of course tempted to forget) that the dramas of history can sweep us away in the twinkling of an eye.

Whether we call it naivete, denial, or spiritual and psychological laziness, something in us will find it difficult to keep in mind the ever-present disabling turbulence of historical forces, nationalisms, political mayhem, or social disintegration. To which we might now add –as we are realising again in an understanding that we in the West might have lost sight of over the last century - the disruption from deadly diseases that can sweep through populations at a dizzying rate. Could a renewed awareness of all these forces - human and from nature - induce in us an attitude of mind that counters our innate omnipotence? That opens up in us a clear-eyed sense of our relative powerlessness and helplessness in regard to shielding ourselves from the ravages of collective forces ranged against us? In other words – and to be specific about our current historical moment – could our exposure to the deadly uncertainties of Covid-19 lead us into a new attitude of humility in the face of life?

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Like many people in the current crisis, I have been reading (or for some of us aging citizens, re-reading) Camus' *La Peste* (The Plague). I am not sure why I wanted to. I know that some friends, wishing to divert their attention away from what is happening, thought it the one book that they would least like to engage with at the moment. I do understand that impulse for distraction, for something (anything) to enliven the spirits, something (anything) that's uplifting to the soul – like the wondrous spring blossoms, and the birdsong, and the blue skies and endless sunny days that coincided with the arrival of the virus. In the presence of death: life going on; life renewed; new life... Easter and resurrection. And so on.

And yes, we all are needing to find ways of getting through each day as best we can, and if possible appreciating – really appreciating – the small things: suddenly the trees in blossom seem extraordinary, almost like miracles. And maybe we realise they aren't 'small' things at all, but things we might in other times rather take for granted. But this year, in the year of our confinement and our fearfulness, as spring arrived they became parts of our daily experience that we suddenly found ourselves really grateful for: nature, in all its glory, and air we can breathe, air unpolluted by civilisation's toxic fumes.

But alongside this I wanted, nevertheless, to find something that might give me insight into the situation of virus, of plague – something that might offer some kind of perspective. Because I'm finding that I can't 'make sense' of what is happening to us, to our nation, to our global civilisation. We are still too close to it, we are in it, there is no place from which we can look clearly or objectively at it. Yet if we sense anything, it is that *life will not be the same again*: when we crash onto the far shore of this perilous journey, our world will look different. But what it will look like we can't say.

So maybe, I thought, Camus might offer a perspective on where we are now – isn't great literature supposed to do that? – and indeed, as I began to read, reflections from 1947 were speaking to my here and now of 2020:

*"From now on it can be said that plague was the concern of all of us. Hitherto, surprised as he may have been by the strange things happening around him, each individual citizen had gone about his business as usual, so far as this was possible. And, no doubt, he would have continued doing so. But once the town gates were shut, every one of us realised that all were, so to speak, in the same boat, and each would have to adapt himself to the new conditions of life."*

Once the lockdown began – like the shutting of the town gates – we saw (as if we didn't know this before) that we are all "in the same boat". The arrival of Covid-19 forced us into a new awareness of the interconnectedness of all of us with each other, and with all life forms on earth. And even if we were not yet carriers of Covid-19 we were (and are) nevertheless all carrying the coronavirus.

Because it quickly became apparent – even before the government took belated action – that the virus was inside us, in our heads: from the beginning of March we were carrying it in our psyches, it was incubating and mutating within us. Nobody could escape it, it was contaminating our mental well-being. It was (is) causing fear, panic, anxiety for our loved ones, concern for our health, concern for our livelihoods, sometimes concern for our lives.

We were (are) struggling to get our heads round what Camus names as "the new conditions of life": holidays cancelled, trips abandoned, meetings postponed, plans

thwarted, worries about how to feed ourselves, how to manage self-isolation, 'social distancing', a dread about the future with the awareness that this is only just beginning (whatever the Prime Minister says)...

We are as yet much too close to events – which evolve day by day – to see anything clearly about what this virus will do to us, as individuals, families, communities, nations. We have no 'outsider' position from which to look at events. There are some hopeful signs – in the generosity of spirit of countless volunteers, and heroic NHS selflessness, and the heart-lifting exploits and response to Captain Tom, and building a hospital in nine days (we were in awe when the Chinese did it, and mocked that it could never happen here). Are these signs that this crisis will show us that concerted, collective action can make a radical difference to how a society behaves? Could we read this as a living symbol that the global environmental crisis could be tackled by immediate radical changes of behaviour once the will is there and world acts together to avert disaster? If we are optimists we might think that Greta Thunberg's raging message has fully arrived: we can – collectively – change direction.

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In decades to come – for the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – we will be judged by how we responded to this crisis: will it lead to a re-evaluation of what really matters – interconnectedness of societies, peoples and nations; care of the marginal and vulnerable; preserving the quality of the air we breathe and the environment that all humanity shares; global economies focused on the highest standards of health care and education and justice? Or will it lead to a descent into selfishness (personal and national), the closing of borders, and the squandering of one of the greatest opportunity for transforming the fundamental values of civilisation that modernity has ever been presented with?

Maybe crisis will bring out the best in the human spirit. There are wonderful examples of it all around. But I'm not holding my breath – to use a phrase which has taken a darker turn in recent months – that the benign, uplifting spirit of support and co-operation will prevail as deaths continue, and so-called 'normal' living remains as elusively far-away as ever.

At the best of times, we know that fear generates aggression in us. But when the fear we feel is fear of death – what happens then? I keep as my touchstone an experience I had in the early days of the crisis, before social distancing had entered fully into the public domain. I was in the supermarket and as I went to pay at the till I brushed momentarily against the arm of a man's coat. I would have thought nothing of it – but he leapt back (literally, not metaphorically) several metres with a look of complete panic and horror on his face. As if he'd seen the devil. Which I guess he had, from his perspective.

My first thought was: in ages past, was this how a leper was treated? And then, an archaic, atavistic thought: was this how 'the Jew' was seen in times gone by? Either way, I felt I was the bearer of something that threatened life itself. Or rather: I felt as if I was being *experienced* as someone who threatened life itself. And I have been wondering since then: was this just an aberration, someone perhaps already suffering from some kind of social phobia, or paranoia? Or was it a straw in the wind? We know how much fear of the 'other' – and the sick 'other' within ourselves – lurks in the unconscious.

Fear corrodes the soul. Fear is the acid in which solidarity dissolves. Fear grips our hearts and attacks our compassion and generosity of spirit.

Camus' psychologically acute novel is an exceptional analysis of a universal phenomenon: *"Each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in someone's face and fasten the infection on him... The good man, the man who hardly infects anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention."*

Let's hope we can keep attentive in these perilous times. To do so – with full cognizance of how our unconscious can subvert our best intentions – may in the end have something to do with humility.

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Finally: let's hope it's not too hubristic to say that February 4<sup>th</sup> 2021 is the rearranged date for the Guild lecture I was due to give this May.

I imagine that I might be – we could all be – thinking about humility in quite new ways by that time: *deo volente*, God willing, *in'shallah*.

Howard Cooper, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020