



Renewing Relationship

BEFORE COVID – AFTER COVID
FINDING MEANING IN A POST-COVID WORLD



INTRODUCTION

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic offers an unprecedented opportunity for those of us involved in global health to look at current philosophy and practice.

We've had a universal experience of isolation, of shortages, fear and new rules. How might those shared realities help us consider new ways to renew our solidarity with our partners in low- and middle-income countries and to assist us as we build something different through our global health strategies?

“The pandemic is a crisis and we do not emerge from a crisis the same as before: either we come out of it better or we come out of it worse. We must come out of it better, to counter social injustice and environmental damage. Today we have an opportunity to build something different,” said Pope Francis.*

In order to come out better, we will need to identify where breakdowns occurred when travel was banned and consider if new paths need to be created. Many public health and access challenges have become more evident, requiring lengthy research and analysis, but, overall, how do we emerge from quarantine with greater meaning and purpose? What are we learning from all that is happening amid this global pandemic?

The following essays are an offering to set the stage for collective consideration of how the complexities and challenges of the pandemic create an opportunity for us to rethink, reset and renew our global health relationships. While COVID-19 and the isolation we have experienced inspires more questions, they provide us with renewed hope and inspiration to do it better in the future. We hope you will take this time “apart” to reflect on our future opportunity to be brother and sister to our global neighbors.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bruce Compton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

BRUCE COMPTON

*Senior Director, Global Health
Catholic Health Association of the United States*

*From Pope Francis' General Audience on Aug. 19, 2020.



(BC-AC)

BEFORE COVID-AFTER COVID

FINDING MEANING

IN A POST-COVID WORLD

(BC – AC)

Before COVID-After COVID Finding Meaning in a Post-COVID World

BY NEERAJ MISTRY



Never before in human history as we know it has almost the entire world been unified in action as we are experiencing now in the COVID-19 pandemic. Irrespective of class, creed, culture or religion, we are all practicing social distancing and hunkering down in place.

The impact of these stay-at-home policies varies based on where we live, our economic status and whether or not we live alone, with family or with friends. Yet, what is clear is that our engagement with the world has changed and the uncertainty of our future is a shared experience.

The systems and mechanisms of social life, work and leisure in the Before-COVID (BC) world, through which we derived our self-worth, meaning and contribution, halted almost in an instant. These systems represented both the best AND the worst of humanity. Best in terms of creativity and ingenuity, advanced technology, economic growth, globalized trade and travel and even space exploration. Worst in the ever-growing inequalities, growing racial divides and ethnic conflicts, and at times, blatant disregard for human life and dignity. And so dominant and pervasive were these systems on our human psyche that we felt helpless and like victims of these divergent systems, constantly trying to keep up on the treadmill until ... the world stopped with COVID-19.

Frederich Nietzsche said, “To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.” Various articulations along this theme are consistent across other philosophies and theologies, and now we have with this pandemic, the opportunity to derive deeper meaning into our existence. In fact, we have the rare opportunity to reset the human experience in the After-COVID (AC) world.

With “man being the architect of his own fate,” what in the AC world will we choose to prioritize? Based on an analysis of many online discussions, media coverage and conversations with friends and family, here are some thoughts:

We’re all in this together: No country or group of people has been spared from the reach of COVID-19, and this global infectious outbreak is not the last of its kind.

We’re All in This Together: No country or group of people has been spared from the reach of COVID-19, and this global infectious outbreak is not the last of its kind. Our common vulnerability is an opportunity for solidarity in action, especially in a world that is swinging toward nationalism and nativism. A global pandemic requires global action built on trust and collaboration to strengthen the institutions that represent our collective good. The United Nations and all its family of organizations, for example, was created in the aftermath of the world wars for that specific purpose. Through active participation and support of these institutions, we

have a vehicle of working together. This was clearly evidenced in all national responses to COVID-19 that highlighted the need for ventilators, swabs for testing, disinfectant and sanitizers, gloves, face masks and other personal protective equipment. It became immediately apparent that the supply chain was a vast global network, highlighting the interdependence we all have as nations and people. We will not be able to respond to these needs if we don’t work together, pool resources and coordinate a response. The BC world we lived in was rife with competition, territorialism and suspicion. Can we in the AC world move to collaboration, openness and trust?

Human Connection Is Paramount: What we certainly took for granted BC was our ability to pick up and go out, whether for sport, entertainment, food and drink. We also took for granted how we work with others, often forgetting the people involved, but channeling efforts toward tasks and deadlines. With close contact in lockdown, the depth of engagement among families, children and friends has reintroduced us to

**In an AC world...
[will we] find ways
of connecting on our
shared humanity?**

meaningful relations. It is heart-warming doing the “check-in” at the start of every conference/video call. It speaks emphatically to “I see the human in you.” In an AC world, can we transcend the valuation of people based on their income, qualification, social status or education to find ways of connecting on our shared humanity? There is always something that any two people randomly paired will find in common. Will we in an AC world take the time to look?

Nature and the Environment Can Bounce Back: We have been bad custodians on this planet, and with pride in our intellect and technological advancement, we have consumed resources, polluted the environment and produced more waste than ever before. Social distancing has reduced road and air travel. Cities which remained in a haze of smog for decades, are suddenly seeing blue skies and the return of birds and wildlife. People are literally taking a breath of fresh air. Not being able to perceive this level of intervention with social and commercial shut down, the effort to curb climate change could not have even dreamt of this level of environmental rebound. It is comforting to know this resilience of the environment, yet humbling to realize our role and impact. How do we, in an AC world, respect and give consideration to the environment and appreciate that the daily engagement with nature is actually enriching to our life journeys?

Systems are Man-Made and Can Be Reset: The systems that shape our life experience and worldview condition us from the time we are born and depend on our geography and social context of development. Whether it is a system of market-based products and services, a welfare state, equity-driven policies or survival of the fittest approaches, what we should realize is that there is no absolute system and single ideology that applies to everyone. This elusive quest has in fact driven apart societies on political, religious and racial lines. Yet, various systems do have positive attributes and benefits. We don't have to be beholden to a singular approach, but can create hybrid systems drawing on different ideologies, based on a society's or population's needs and priorities. We can have social safety nets and enjoy the creative competition of markets at the same time. We just need to be open to have that conversation, which means we need to remove our political and ideological labels as preconditions to discussion. Can we in an AC world talk as just human beings trying to better the human experience for everyone?

Re-evaluating Work and Labor: Because of the market-based capitalist view of the world BC, premium was placed on jobs and professions associated with money. These included banking, finance, property and commercial business. However, as we lock down and provide care, support and treatment at home, in the community and in health centers, with the support of “essential” services to keep people safe, fed, and healthy, it has shone a light differently on which jobs keep society functioning. Health workers, childcare professionals and educators, utility workers and trash collectors, agriculture and livestock workers and truckers are some of the behind-the-scenes jobs that are poorly paid in the shadow of wealth concentration in finance sectors and senior management. Can we in an AC world think and act more with intentional trickle-down of wealth through equitable policies and place more monetary value on jobs and professions with high social impact?

Strengthening Baseline Health: The coronavirus biology, transmission and disease manifestations are complex as we learn more every day about this virus. A consistent feature though, has been that there is an increased vulnerability that some population groups may have, particularly those with underlying medical conditions and socioeconomic environments associated with poor health. Diseases such as hypertension, obesity and diabetes, which predispose to more advanced heart disease, fatty liver disease and kidney disease, have been associated with more severe manifestations of COVID-19 infection and higher death rates. Can we, in an AC world, pay closer attention to our baseline level of health through proper routines and diet, good lifestyle choices, exercise and weight control and reduced stress and good relations?

Mindful Action: Mindfulness is the “quality or state of being conscious or aware of something.” To prevent the subsequent waves and continuous transmission of COVID-19, reopening society is going to require careful social engagement, ergonomic

design, workplace interactions and leisure contact.

Even with the best interventions lack of attention to detail, blind situational awareness, cavalier and careless attitudes and distracting activities will put people at increased risk of contracting and transmitting the coronavirus. Mindful engagement with people and the environment may be the most important change we

Mindful engagement with people and the environment may be the most important change we make in an AC world...

make in an AC world. Can we reprogram our busyness and multitasking, and be present and aware in the moment?

At a deeper level, mindfulness, like other theological and religious beliefs, is the psychological process of purposely bringing one's attention to experiences occurring in the present moment without judgment. Could the absence of judgment be the most important lesson we learn and the truest meaning we find from the suffering we are enduring through this COVID-19 pandemic? Detaching from judgment allows us the openness of heart and mind in everything we do. This would form the basis of authentic engagement with each other and the environment, something from which we have strayed away for a long time.

After the world wars, there were moments in the collective consciousness of “never again,” yet we soon forgot, resulting in what Socrates said was the “unexamined life is not worth living.” We have with COVID-19 in the AC world an opportunity to examine our life and make it worth living. Will we?



NEERAJ MISTRY, MD, MSC, is co-founding Partner and Medical Director at Health Business Solutions LLC, and an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Health at Georgetown University. A South African national and public health physician, Dr. Mistry is experienced in global health policy and programming, having worked in developing and developed countries, the public and private sectors in clinical practice, health policy and social development.



The current pandemic has highlighted our interdependence: we are all connected to each other, for better or for worse. Therefore, to emerge from this crisis better than before, we have to do so together; together, not alone. Together. Not alone, because it cannot be done. Either it is done together, or it is not done. We must do it together, all of us, in solidarity.

POPE FRANCIS

General Audience, Sept. 2, 2020

Washington Office

1875 Eye Street NW, Ste. 1000
Washington, DC 20006-5440
(202) 296-3993

St. Louis Office

4455 Woodson Road
St. Louis, MO 63134-3797
(314) 427-2500

