

Coronavirus a Parable of Our Time

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Detective Agency. He appears in the episode entitled 'Poison' as himself thanking members of the business community of Gaborone for their donations to the fictional orphanage portrayed in the series. He is the author of 'Dancing Sermons' (published 2006). He is married to Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba a Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General from 2008 to 2014

The beginning ... once upon a virus ...

In Wuhan, China, in the third week of December 2019, Dr Ai Fen, the director of the Emergency Department, at the Central Hospital, diagnosed an unusual lung infection in a person.

A similar infection was diagnosed in another person on December 27th. Three days later Dr Ai Fen saw written on the test sheet "SARS coronavirus". It was a red flag. She informed the hospital's public-health department, took a picture of the laboratory report and emailed it to other doctors.

An ophthalmologist, Li Wenliang, posted in a WeChat group that a coronavirus had been discovered in Wuhan. The news went viral among doctors and public-health officials in the city.

Li was summoned by the police and cautioned for spreading false news on the Internet. News outlets warning Wuhan residents of the virus were blocked. Li later contracted the virus and died on 7th February 2020. His death caused anger over the government's attempts to stifle whistle blowers.

Wuhan is a megacity of 11 million people and capital of Central China's Hubei province. It is a commercial centre with beautiful lakes like the picturesque East Lake. It is a tale of two cities.

One side is an ultra-modern city with subways, skyscrapers, and superhighways, and the other is rural with 'wet markets' like Huanan, selling live wild animals such as bats, bamboo rats, monkeys, foxes, snakes, etc. Into this city waltzed the coronavirus.

In 2012 a book 'Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic,' by the American writer David Quammen, was published. Quammen wrote that humanity is invading tropical forests and other wild landscapes, which harbour so many species of animals and plants, and within those creatures, so many unknown viruses. Humanity, he voiced, is cutting down the trees; killing the animals or caging them and sending them to markets. In doing so, humanity is disrupting ecosystems, and shaking viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, he concluded, "They need a new host. Often, we are it."

The book confirms what epidemiologists have long warned, that as more people live in closer proximity to wildlife, the more risk there will be of viruses, known as 'zoonotic viruses,' making the jump to humans.

Scientists think this is what happened with Covid -19. The origins of the coronavirus are a merry-go-round of speculations, from bats, to biologically engineered viral life, to a plague in the biblical sense, to 5G networks. The US administration, in a blame game, has accused China's Wuhan Institute of Virology as the source of the pandemic in a standoff, making the origin of the virus political.

The scientific view is that Covid - 19 originated from bats, as 96 percent of the virus's genome is identical to one found in horseshoe bats, and has made the jump to humans.

When the virus was initially detected, the Chinese government suppressed and denied news of its discovery. However, their attitude changed on New Year's Eve. The Chinese authorities informed the World Health Organization about a possible viral outbreak. On New Year's Day the Huanan seafood market was closed. Six days later they identified the pathogen as a novel coronavirus.

On January 10th the genetic sequence of the virus was reported to scientists around the world. The World Health Organization named it SARS-CoV-2. Shortly, a German laboratory used the genetic data to create the first test for the virus, which was adopted by the WHO and made available to the international community. The whole process in scientific time was rapid.

As the Covid-19 drama played out in a far-flung place, I travelled in February from London to the parish of Torre Vieja, Spain, in the Anglican Diocese in Europe, to do a locum duty in the absence of their priest.

Mid-March, Spain declared a State of Emergency over the coronavirus pandemic. I joined many people, mostly tourists, at Alicante Airport in a frantic haste to get out of the country. I managed to get on the last flight to Berlin. The next day the Airport and border closed.

In Berlin, I went into self-isolation and contemplated Covid-19. How could this microbe shake the world's foundation, turning things upside down: politically, economically, socially, culturally, religiously, technologically, medically, in aviation, sports, entertainment, travel, etc? The thoughts of my contemplation streamed into a parable and other stories.

A Parable and Other Stories...

Covid - 19 as a parable of our time is provoking us to think critically about what truly matters in life, relationships, the environment, God.

Humanity, forced into a global retreat is learning: to be still, to listen, to think seriously. Thinking seriously we become aware of things. Things forgotten, things lost, things spiritual. We think of stories to help us heal, to help us decipher Covid-19. I share the stories that emerged from my thoughts.

The first was an African story layered in wisdom.

Once upon a time, in a penthouse on the roof of a Chief's hut, lived a rat. One day the rat saw a man setting a trap on the boundary of the village. The rat was troubled, thinking it was a bad place to set a trap.

When the man had finished setting the trap, the rat ran hastily down to break it but failed. The rat had a bad feeling that trouble was brewing because of the trap.

The rat then saw a chicken coming along and ran to it. The rat breathlessly told the chicken his apprehension about the trap and pleaded with the chicken to break it.

The chicken thought the rat was crazy and refused to break the trap. The rat pleaded fervently with the chicken, saying the trap was in a bad place and would get everybody into trouble. The chicken said that it didn't care, the trap was not made for it or the rat and therefore they should not be bothered about it. But the rat pleaded with the chicken to care. The chicken did not care and went on with its business.

The rat was devastated but then saw a goat coming along. The rat thought, great, the goat is bigger than the chicken and can easily break the trap. The rat told the goat its concern and pleaded with it to break the trap into smithereens.

The goat thought the rat was crazy and said that he was busy and had no time for breaking traps. And like the chicken, it didn't care either. The rat pleaded for the goat to care. Unconcerned, the goat left to get on with its business.

The rat was hysterical and overwhelmed with a sense of foreboding, when along came a cow. The rat said to the cow, 'Please, please, listen! The chicken and the goat say that they don't care!'

The cow said, 'what are you talking about ... what is it you are fussing about?' The rat said, 'that trap over there, we are all going to be in serious trouble because of it. Please go and break it.'

The cow responded, 'Rat, you know what? Sometimes you should listen to other people. They tell you they don't care, take it like that - they don't care, and you want me to care.' Why? I am a cow! I am big, that thing can't harm me.'

The rat interjected, 'No, no, we are all going to be in serious trouble.'

'How?' asked the cow, and said, 'It's nonsense, I don't care either.' And off went the cow about its business.

Frustrated, the rat wondered what to do. As he was thinking, a big snake came slithering from some place, and taking a shortcut went straight to where the trap was and got caught by its tail.

Furiously, it struggled to get out but to no avail. At that moment the Chief of the village came along walking to his Royal Palace. Unaware, he walked straight to where the deadly snake caught in the trap was struggling to escape and he got bitten.

The Chief screamed, 'I have been bitten!' The villagers came running from everywhere saying, 'What's up?' The Chief said, 'I have been bitten. It's a snake!' The villagers saw the snake and killed it.

Angry, the villagers wanted to know who set the trap. Of course they couldn't concentrate on that right now, as they had to treat the Chief who had been bitten by the snake. They took the Chief to his Palace, and shortly afterwards he died.

Funeral arrangements commenced as the sun set. People in the village began gathering at the Chief's Palace.

The elders ordered a meal to be prepared and, as there were few people, thought the chicken would suffice. So the chicken was slaughtered. The rat exclaimed, 'Aha! You see, I said that this trap would be trouble. Look now the chicken is dead. He said that he didn't care. Now he is dead!'

Morning came and people from other villages arrived. As there were now more people for lunch, the goat was next. So the goat was slaughtered. The rat exclaimed, 'Aha! You see. The goat said he did not care, now look, he is a goner. I told them this trap was going to get us all into serious trouble. The chicken is dead. The goat is dead.'

Evening came. Other Chiefs turned up. And on the menu for dinner was the cow! So the cow was slaughtered. The rat exclaimed, 'Aha! You see what has happened? They all asked how this trap was going to affect

us?' The chicken is dead. The goat is dead. The cow is dead. They are all dead. And all said that they didn't care! I told them to care!

The Chief was buried the next day. After a Chief's burial it is customary that his hut is burnt. So the Chief's hut was set on fire. And the rat in its penthouse died in the inferno.

The chicken, the goat, the cow, all didn't care! The rat insisted they should care. Their lack of care and concern had deadly consequences.

This African story transforms into a famous German poem by the Reverend Martin Niemöller:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.

Niemöller, an outspoken opponent of Adolf Hitler, spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. His poem was addressed to fellow Germans, especially the leaders of the Protestant churches who he believed were complicit through their silence in the Nazi imprisonment, persecution and murder of millions of people.

The story and the poem seek to invoke caring, compassion, and solidarity in us. And they bring us to our second story.

Deena Metzger is a remarkable American woman, writer and healer. In 1977 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Traumatized, she asked herself questions: 'What is the message of this illness that comes to me in this form? What is the meaning of this illness, in particular, coming to me, in particular, at this time, in particular? What have I been unable to understand or have ignored until it comes in this life-threatening form?'

Deena's answer to her questions was that she had to change her life drastically, down to the cellular level. In her own words, 'And I did. It was not easy; the process was long, difficult, disturbing and is on-going. It

continues through this day. Gradually, I understood that even as I was ill and wanting to preserve my own life, I had to shift to consider the whole.'

Faced with cancer she seriously re-examined her life, considered what mattered and what should fall away; considered if one recovered from a life-threatening illness one could not return to the ways that were killing one and others.

In her contemplative mood something inexplicable happened: Deena encountered God. She was in awe and wonder. She saw her life as wrapped in a story and circumstances, allowing her to be responsible to the deepest aspects of her soul, the world, the family, the community, the Earth. She saw her healing would be equally benevolent for all. God had brought her there.

And *there* she acquired wisdom, and *there* she learned to see beyond the medical diagnosis to the real cause of the illness which was: her lifestyle, her values, her lost spiritual life. Healing began with self-scrutiny. So, Deena in her illness asked: "Given what I now understand, how then shall I live?"

How? Wholistically. Musing on Niemöller's poem, she saw it ecologically, something we, and perhaps Niemöller, may not have perceived. With ecological lens, the poem speaks of our indifference to creation:

First the animals began dying, going extinct, and we did not stop what we were doing because we are not animals.

Then the glaciers started melting, and we did not stop what we were doing because we thought we could do without them.

Then the forests were disappearing, and we did not stop cutting down the trees because we could not imagine being unable to breathe.

Then the virus came, and there was no one to stop us but ourselves.

Deena's story teaches us integrity, truth for living. That is the only reality between life and death. As lies and pretence die, particularly about ourselves, only truth lives. This echoes Polonius in Hamlet: "To thine own self be true".

Let us now imagine our world as a dying Covid-19 patient. It should stir in us empathy because we are intrinsically part of the world. What Aryeh Lev Stollman in his book 'The Illuminated Soul' termed the 'net of reality'.

The net of reality weaves seemingly disparate things together and makes of them a whole cloth. On its own, our world seems a chaos of events unrelated to the human mind, but in fact this is not the case. The perception is only due to our limitations of observation and reason. So, the African story, Niemöller's poem, Deena's story, are one cloth, one narrative, variations of Wisdom instructing us we are all one in creation; and should therefore be empathetic, caring, and loving in our lives.

The World as a Covid - 19 patient echoes Deena's questions:

What is the message of Covid-19 that comes to me in this form? What is the meaning of this Covid-19, coming to me at this time, in particular? What have I been unable to understand or have ignored until it comes in this life-threatening form?

The answers flow: perhaps it's because of our uncaring life style? Perhaps our failure to see life holistically? Perhaps our irreverence towards the sanctity of creation? Perhaps the virus is a manifestation of human disrespect and maltreatment of the earth's resources. Perhaps it is Mother Nature's way of saying to us, "Stop! Stop! Be very careful, your irreverence and abuse of the environment is killing me? I can't breathe!"

There was a time when Covid - 19 would have been viewed by our ancestors as a plague from angry gods to punish humanity's irreverence and exploitation of the natural world.

In our time we think it is gobbledygook, maybe. Scientists are learning how humanity's activities are impacting the environment. The burning of fossil fuels in particular is increasingly and severely harming the world by extreme storms, persistent droughts, massive wildfires, and recurring heat waves, which are getting worse. May 2020 was the hottest in recorded history and the Arctic Circle also recorded its hottest temperature ever. In June the carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere hit a new high unmatched in the past three million years.

Scientists are rethinking the relationship between human beings and the earth.

Assuming our diagnosis is correct, Covid-19 is warning us to change our lifestyles now. *Given the scientific evidence we have, it does not seem to be a head issue but a heart issue needed for us to act.* Theologian Sallie McFague's insight is helpful. She wrote sensitively on care for the earth, which she saw as *God's body*.

God's body can't breathe because our life style is suffocating it by creating climate change. The excessive energy use and polluting of the planet causing greenhouse-gas emissions is changing the planet's climate adversely.

In a comprehensive 2014 assessment of anticipated impacts by the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), two catastrophic consequences are noted: the destruction of the Amazon rain forest and the melting of the Arctic ice cap. Both are happening, reducing the survival prospects of flora and fauna in their respective habitats. As they progress, entire ecosystems will cease and species killed off with drastic consequences for humans who rely on them for their survival. In such changes, other species, perhaps insects and microorganisms, highly dangerous to humans could take the spaces emptied by extinction.

Climate change is reflecting *how we each live* on a daily basis, as well as, surprising as it may sound, our lives' spiritual crisis.

Humanity's survival depends on a fundamental change in its thinking and perception of life. That is, a spiritual and social transformation of the world, creating a new political and economic paradigm focused on human wellbeing rather than profit. Echoing Pope Francis, people are more important than the economy. What matters in life is to live a life of meaning and purpose, not material accumulation, consumption or endless new technologies. But meaningful lives focused on loving, serving, and caring for others, especially the vulnerable as well as the creation.

For the earth to breathe, to flourish, we must love it, appreciate it, not as a resource but as a focus for wonder and respect. We need to reject the lie that success and progress means the endless growth and

accumulation of things. *This is chasing the wrong things.* Jesus Christ asked, 'And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?'

The earth breathes and flourishes when humanity knows it is an intrinsic part of creation, existing not to dominate the earth, but to love and nurture it, to cultivate and take care of it. The earth can never be taken for granted, or its brokenness. We love God *through, in, with,* and even *because of* creation.

Our third story reveals creation's mystical connection.

An ancient Prayer of Azariah in the Apocrypha illuminates God's creation as a mystical expression, blessing, singing, and exalting God forever:

"Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Let the earth bless the Lord; let it sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Bless the Lord, mountains and hills; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Bless the Lord, all that grows in the ground; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Bless the Lord, seas and rivers; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Bless the Lord, you springs; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Bless the Lord, you whales and all that swim in the waters; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Bless the Lord, all birds of the air; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

Bless the Lord, all wild animals and cattle; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever.

"Bless the Lord, all people on earth; sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever." (35, 52-60).

The prayer reveals that the worship of God is the life of creation. God permeates existence, seen and unseen, animating every created thing to worship. For of God, and through God, and to God, are all things: to whom be glory forever.

The prayer further illuminates the unity of creation in worship, we experience, in the words of Richard Rohr, 'radical unity with all of humanity and all of creation, and hence ... the experience of unity with God, who is the Great Includer of all ...'

Yet our world has become exclusionary. How did it get here? This is the gist of our fourth story - forgetting God.

Indelibly imprinted on my mind is a speech '*Men have Forgotten God*' which Alexander Solzhenitsyn the great Russian writer, delivered in 1983, when he received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, in London.

He recalled as a child, old folk saying that the reason for the Russian Revolution was because *people had forgotten God and that's why the disaster had happened*. He did not believe it.

So, Solzhenitsyn spent 50 years trying to understand the Russian Revolution, clearing away the rubble left by the upheaval. 50 years later, if asked to sum up concisely the main reason for the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million Russians, he said he could not put it more accurately than to repeat what he had heard as a child: *people had forgotten God and that's why the disaster had happened*.

Solzhenitsyn traced the root to the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution in Europe. It was epitomized by the French mathematician and philosopher Rene Descartes who wrote of employing science and human knowledge so that "we can... render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature."

The belief has held sway over the last three centuries that the Earth exists to be exploited by humanity. So science and technology is utilised to overpower nature and harness it to our will.

Though Descartes' thinking has enhanced the scientific and technological enterprise, it has also radically *impoverished* the world in terms of its qualitative dimensions of *moral purpose* and *spiritual meaning*. Consequently, as Solzhenitsyn judged, it led to secularism

which gave rise to atheistic Soviet tyranny and a spiritually bankrupt Western world.

The spiritual bankruptcy of the West is the loss of the sacred resulting in the desecration of essential ecosystems by deforestation and despoliation of the oceans in the dumping of wastes and plastics.

Remembering God...

In the space where 2019 receded into the eternal past and 2020 was born, the world changed. Change happens when the old begins to fall apart, or die. Covid -19 stepped in and exposed, in a world falling apart, its divisions, injustices, inequalities, and the suffering of the poor and vulnerable.

The world reached a tipping point where systemic injustice, politically, economically, socially, environmentally, the suffering it causes, the role played by the privileged and powerful, nationally and globally, in perpetuating such systems, is no longer acceptable.

In the sacred and moral universe in which we live, the world falling apart is indicative of the fact that truth, justice, equality, good, cannot be suppressed indefinitely. *Vaclav Havel, in his essays Living in Truth, wrote: 'The desire to be in touch with what is true, and to live by it in all its consequences, is deeply embedded in human beings. We cannot live falsely for long; truth has a radiant power that cannot be quenched...we cannot live for long 'within the lie'.*

The main lie is our rejection of the sacred in our lives and the creation. The British philosopher Roger Scruton in his book, 'The Soul of the World,' explores the experience of the sacred against today's atheism. He writes that our personal relationships and moral intuitions point to a divine dimension that cannot be understood through the eyes of science alone. So to be fully alive, to understand what we are, is to acknowledge the reality of sacred things.

Ignoring the sacred triggers an inner spiritual climate change where as in the outer world, "...things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world", something Alexander Solzhenitsyn perceived, 'the failings of human consciousness, deprived of its divine

dimension, have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of this century.'

Remembering God saves our souls and that of the world. God omnipresent, the energy of Love and beauty, the infinite web of Life and relationships, the energy in moments, in emotions and rationality, the visible and invisible, present in the past, the now, and future; the energy of the expanding universe, the Breath of Life we inhale and exhale.

Humanity *is* an offspring of God. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, Bahai, Shintos, Jains, Atheists, Agnostics, Asians, Africans, Europeans; are all children of God. The awareness of this reality is transformative. There is no superior race, only the human race. There is no super power only the Sovereignty of God. There are not many religions, only the Religion of Love.

Such awareness gives humanity and the world its soul in which God breathes love, wisdom, peace, hope, compassion, humour, anew each moment.

In our sacred and moral universe with its arc long but bent towards justice, benevolent powers of love and truth employ subtle means to draw humanity back to its moral compass.

Hence the appearance of Covid – 19, exposing and uprooting lies hitherto accepted as 'truth and normal' in political and economic systems. It is an awakening for humanity to be *in touch with what is true and to live by it in all its consequences; to be in touch with the better angels of our nature; to let the milk of human kindness flow.*

George Bernard Shaw once said, 'There are those that look at things the way they are, and ask why? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?'

Covid -19 is compelling us to 'dream of things that never were', to dream 'God's Dream', which the French poet Charles Peguy inspiringly illuminated thus:

"I myself will dream a dream within you,
good dreams come from me, you know.

My dreams seem impossible,
not too practical,
not for the cautious man or woman
a little risky sometimes,
a trifle brash perhaps.

...But, from those who share my dreams
I ask a little patience, a little humour;
some small courage,
and a listening heart –
I will do the rest.

Then they will risk
and wonder at their daring.
Run, and marvel at their speed,
build, and stand in awe at the beauty of their building.

...So, come now, be content.
It is my dream you dream,
my house you build,
my caring you witness,
my love you share,
and this is the heart of the matter.

I believe that as our world falls apart we can dream to build a better,
kinder, gentler, just, and environmentally sustainable world.

We can dream of a new political and economic order globally focused on
human well-being rather than material profit.

We can dream of a just and fair global economic system based on the
principles of justice amongst nations, not greed.

We can dream of a world free of systemic racism, sexism, xenophobia,
homophobia, and all forms of bigotry and prejudice.

We can dream of a world that honours, values, and enhances diversity in
all its multifaceted ways to enrich life.

We can dream of a peaceful world free of nuclear, biological, weapons of mass destruction; and where nations will never wage war on each other.

We can dream of a world in which society's "success" is judged by how economic, political and social systems increase love, caring, kindness, generosity, awe and wonder at the grandeur and mystery of Life.

We can dream because it is God dreaming within us. For good dreams come from God, you know.

Crucially vital to actualising God's Dream in our age is good and visionary leadership.

Years ago I read Theodore C. Sorensen's book, *Decision – Making in the White House*. His conclusion was, " I can only offer a conclusion which all of us already know: that the only way to assure good presidential decisions is to elect and support good Presidents. For in mixing all these ingredients (the challenges and forces that presidents have to deal with), his style and standard, his values and vitality, his insights and outlook will make the crucial difference. A great presidential decision defies the laws of mathematics and exceeds the sum of all its parts. A great President is not the product of his staff but the master of his house."

The fact is bad leadership, a bad President, a bad Prime Minister, is extremely harmful to a nation and the world. He is a destroyer of his house. In the current pandemic an example will suffice. Jeff Goodell's erudite article, *The President and the Plague*, published in the May 2020 edition of the Rolling Stone magazine, illustrates this by analysing Presidents Obama and Trump in their handling of Ebola and Covid-19 respectively.

President Obama, in dealing with the Ebola outbreak in 2014 acted decisively. He organised an emergency meeting at the United Nations. He sent 3,000 U.S. troops to West Africa to help build hospitals and support doctors and health workers. Globally, the outbreak killed 11,300, mostly in Africa. But it was a public-health triumph.

After the outbreak, the Global Health Security Agenda was set up to build cooperation and share knowledge about pandemics between

nations. Its purpose was: “to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious disease threats” together with the National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense, which was essentially a new department within the National Security Council. A small book known as 'The Pandemic Playbook' on how to respond to a pandemic was also produced in 2016.

President Obama exerted a lot of political capital, into fighting the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa. The Ebola outbreak showed how powerful a role America could play in a pandemic if it chose to, as well as shaping the views of a generation of epidemiologists and virus hunters.

When President Trump took office, he drained the National Security Council of anyone with expertise in pandemics. Public health budgets were slashed and international groups focused on disease and medicine, such as the World Health Organization, were shunned.

The Trump administration briefed in 2017 about the playbook apparently didn't give it serious attention. And within a year, all the pandemic expertise was gone.

Susan Rice, former National Security Adviser in the Obama administration, wrote an Opinion in the New York Times in March 2020, saying, “Rather than heed the warnings, embrace the planning, and preserve the structures and budgets that had been bequeathed to him, the president ignored the risk of a pandemic”.

At the outbreak of Covid -19, public-health experts focused on the numbers displayed at the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center website, recording the rise of infections around the world in real time, giving people a sense of the global spread of the virus. However, President Trump's focus was on an entirely different set of numbers: the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

Rajiv Shah, the President of the Rockefeller Foundation commented, “This is a global pandemic, and it requires a commitment to global cooperation and science...and it requires the President of the United States to lead.”

The dearth of leadership is catastrophic to the world. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres recently said, 'The damage caused by the pandemic is partly because countries embarked on different strategies to counter the virus rather than a unified response.'

The pandemic crisis needs the good leadership exhibited when the world went through the 2008 financial crisis.

Then, the world's financial system was on the brink of total systemic collapse. At the eleventh hour, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Gordon Brown emerged as a dynamic leader and was depicted as a modern-day Atlas holding up the world.

He did so by thinking clearly about the financial crisis, and acting quickly on its conclusions. His plan to get the UK banks on track provided the template for the Eurozone and US governments' to do likewise.

Brown's combination of clarity and decisiveness was not matched in other Western governments. Paul Krugman, the Nobel laureate for economics, commented that Brown's clear thinking was necessary and scarce among other world leaders.

Our world desperately needs the good leadership exemplified by Gordon Brown. The world cannot survive with bad leadership. The onus is on voters always to elect good people. They should filter all political candidates and ask what is their character like? What are their ethics? The political landscape is overly littered with politicians lacking integrity, eschewing the truth, divisive, and whose agendas are myopic and self-aggrandising.

The anatomy of a good leader is that he or she is a 'political mystic'. Charles Péguy said, '*Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.*'

Great political leaders live this truth and enrich the world with their idealism, love, vision and hope. They are reconcilers uniting peoples, communities, and nations. They are inclusionary not exclusionary. I think of Nelson Mandela, Julius Nyerere, Mahatma Gandhi, Ketumile Masire, Lester Pearson, Vaclav Havel, Dag Hammarskjöld, and John F Kennedy, all political mystics.

Mystics in the sense of their awareness of God, of their lives being shaped from the inside out, of being willing individuals to be channels of God's purpose in passionately tackling the world's political, economic, and social injustices.

Political mystics are able to do so because, as the German Theologian Dorothee Soelle perceived, they are liberated from the three powers that typically hold humans in bondage: ego, possession, and violence.

Political mystics know that their political calling is to a Higher Power. And connection with the Divine is likewise a connection to all other humans and, indeed, to all of creation - a relationship, as Soelle said, that "borrows the eyes of God."

Seeing as God sees, they bring down walls of division and build bridges of unity and community. Where violence erupts they bring peace and whatever nurtures the common good of peoples to flourish.

Political mystics live out their faith, it is not a private and "otherworldly" thing, but alive in their political practice. In the words of Hammarskjold, "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action". Thus giving meaning to Charles Péguy's insight.

The great American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. said, "The life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience." By this he meant that the judges who made the law lived and experienced social, economic, political, and other circumstances which made, informed, and defined law.

Likewise politics is the distillation of the same ingredients and circumstances. All relationships in life are politics: our relationship with God, our relationship with the environment, our relationship within ourselves, and each other. Good politics, locally and globally, stems from wholesome relationships and bad politics from unwholesome relationships.

The end of the beginning...

Coronavirus as a parable of our time has provoked us to think critically about creating wholesome relationships in life.

So once upon a virus in Wuhan, Rome, Tokyo, London, Berlin, Lusaka, New York, Delhi, Brasilia, the parable and other stories' curative power is in their ability to wake us up and pay attention to life, what is happening around us. The African story, Niemoller's poem, Deena's story, the Prayer of Azariah, Solzhenitsyn's speech, Scruton's book, Peguy's God's Dream; instruct us to pay attention to life and heed its message to be more loving, more caring, more compassionate to each other and our environment. Otherwise we shall all perish.

The sacred dimension is the lens through which wholesome relationship come into focus for us to pay attention. In Holy Scripture, the prophet Micah, as a moral compass, points us to this:

'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'

As God lives in people, 'to walk humbly with your God' is to see every person as a child of God. It is to see what we are blind to, that in every person there is an inalienable dignity and spirit of God. It is to see what we are colour blind to, that every person is one colour, the colour is Love, the colour of God.

Love defines our humanity. The 13th Century poem, Bani Adam (human kind), by the Persian-Muslim polymath Sa'adi, speaks to this:

"Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you have no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain "

Accordingly, the virus of racism in its multifarious expressions, is evil and inhuman; and those who nurture it 'the name of human you cannot retain.' We are created to be human and to be human is to Love all God's children. How?

Our final story teaches us how. God's ways are mysterious. As I was concluding my parable this Opinion which Mr. John Robert Lewis, the Civil Rights Leader and US Congressman, wrote shortly before his death, and published in the New York Times, and appeared on the day of his funeral, which is today, July 30, 2020.

His message is immensely inspiring and here abridged are the wise thoughts of a man who dedicated his life trying to bring equality to all. He was beaten several times and left bloodied, but he never gave up. He never became bitter. He believed in the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence as a much better way.

He believed that it matters not whether we are black or white...It doesn't matter whether we are straight or gay, bisexual, transgender. We are one people, we are one family; we are one house ... and we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters.

May his poignant final words wake us up and encourage us all to dream of a world free of racism, prejudice, intolerance, and hatred.

John Lewis speaks:

"While my time here has now come to an end, I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me.

Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity.

That is why I had to visit Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, though I was admitted to the hospital the following day. I just had to see and feel it for myself that, after many years of silent witness, the truth is still marching on.

Though I was surrounded by two loving parents ...
Unchecked, unrestrained violence and government-sanctioned terror had the power to turn a simple stroll to the store ... or an innocent morning jog down a lonesome country road into a nightmare.

Like so many young people today, I was searching for a way out, or some might say a way in, and then I heard the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on an old radio.

He was talking about the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence. He said we are all complicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by.

He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.

Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key.

The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.

You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time. People on every continent have stood in your shoes, though decades and centuries before you.

The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time. Continue to build union between movements stretching across the globe because we must put away our willingness to profit from the exploitation of others.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe.

In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war.

So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide."

John Lewis was an extraordinary man and political mystic, we commend his soul to God to rest in eternal peace and rise in glory. Amen.

Our challenge....

In the course of history there are times when humanity is compelled to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when the old world and life falls apart and a new world and life of love, peace, and hope is born. Such is our time now.

Covid -19 has changed our world and we have no option but to change too if we are to survive. *The good news is we can*, as Mahatma Gandhi said, 'Be the change you wish to see in the world.'

Each of us by divine grace is being challenged to be a change agent within ourselves and in our world. This change cannot happen without *You!*

To create a world with love, you must be love. To create a world of justice, you must be just. To create a world of peace, you must be peace. To create a world without fear, you must be without fear within your life. To create a world of diversity, you must value and celebrate diversity. To respect and understand other cultures and nations, you must be humble. You always reflect outward what you are within. As you think so you are.

Enough of my contemplations! This I believe, God will not let us go down the drain. Our challenge, each and every one of us, is to become agents of God's Dream that can envision and then create a world of love, peace and justice that lives in harmony with planet Earth. Whatever makes

these kinds of transformation possible is an important part of what we mean when we talk about God.

God bless you and our world.

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Berlin, September 2020*