



Science, compassion and the wee virus

by James O'Dea, Monday, May 4th 2020

Viruses are small, really tiny — measured in nanometers — which allows them to penetrate cells. They propagate with speed like stealthy Ninjas flying through the air and gliding over surfaces where they wait until they can attack any passing organism.

They can bring nations, continents — and the whole world it seems — to a grinding halt, inflicting terrible suffering, painful loss of life, massive disruption of systems and threaten social cohesion.

The wee virus is a veritable titan. But it faces an army mobilized by science: Physicians, researchers and epidemiologists develop screening, treatments, vaccines and all kind of strategies and procedures to isolate and arrest infection and contagion. Without science and its strict methodologies, we would not have been able to eradicate many diseases such as smallpox.

Science cannot fake its findings or pretend it has solutions when it doesn't: charlatans abound in the field of health care, but they eventually get exposed by science, which is evidence-based.

Enter COVID 19. Initially politicians repressed evidence that a dangerous new virus was on the scene, and when it started to spread around the world some governments were either skeptical of its dangerous pandemic aspects or slow to implement containment measures out of a fear it would have adverse economic aspects.

Then the hammer fell: Several countries experienced escalating deaths and desperate efforts to save hundreds of thousands — if not millions — of lives.

Nations closed their borders, and citizens were required to comply with strict quarantine and isolation procedures. Many governments followed the directives of health scientists. In large measure, science took the lead.

At the end of March, President Trump admitted he was altering course based on the scientific data being presented to him and that “the economy is no longer my first priority.”

As with other catastrophic events, there has been a massive outpouring of altruism and compassion. People have been looking out for each other, and health professionals have put their lives on the line to treat waves of infected people. We see that there is a convergence between science and altruistic behavior: We have had epidemiologists telling us that we need to stay in our homes for months if we want to protect both our own health and the lives of others. This convergence reinforces the reality that our interdependence can be looked at from both a scientific perspective and a more spiritual one.

Scientists have been studying altruism for some time now, and the data are solid: altruists have better health indicators, live longer and appear happier. Maybe we don't need science to motivate us to be more compassionate, but it certainly has important implications for policymaking and social cohesion.

Epidemiologists project that upward of two million people would have died in the U.S. if none of the measures recommended by them had been taken to stop the virus. Which begs the question: How many people will die from ignoring the science of climate change?

Ironically, COVID-19 has shown us how much cleaner the air and water are by taking millions of cars off the road, by removing thousands of planes from the sky and polluting cruisers out of the ocean.

Many people have noted that this wee virus has created conditions that force us to examine our personal and collective priorities. Maybe we don't have to live at such a frenetic pace or drive and fly around so much. Maybe we can concentrate on living quality time, nourish quality relationships and get over measuring our lives by how much we have. Social media reflects not only people stirred by compassionate connection but creatively charged to rethink how they have been living their lives.

Could this virus catalyze a cultural shift as it nudges us into deeper introspection about our values? Could it align science with societal healing, enlightened economics and ecological sustainability? If the answer is even a tentative yes, I urge you to spend some of your available online time searching the theme of a culture of peace.

You will find that a great shift is underway with practitioners in nonviolent communication and restorative justice shaping a new peace agenda in schools and communities, educators developing curricula on empathy and heart coherence based on insights from neuroscience, widespread mindfulness practice in a variety of institutional settings, and conflict resolution and dialogic practice in the world's political hot zones.

And like the message that we are being given from the COVID-19 experience that reminds us we have to depend on each other if we are to survive, there is an even bigger story that shows us the work each of us must do to create a global culture of peace.

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