

Maybe Some Real Good Will Come Out of COVID-19

Paul Grogan



Maybe this whole COVID-19 event will act as a sharp prod that fully awakens humanity to two fundamental realities:

- a) Despite what we like to think, we do not in fact exert strong control over our lives; and
- b) Despite all the suffering that each of us goes through life, there is probably no ultimate purpose or meaning to life.

Warnings: This article is not as gloomy as it first appears; and, second, although religiously minded readers will instinctively reject point “b” above, I challenge them to read on because I think many will nevertheless wholeheartedly agree with my final conclusion. We live on the “pale blue dot” so eloquently described by astronomer Carl Sagan as he contemplated the image of our planet taken from the Voyager spacecraft as it exited the solar system. “Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. ... Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.” Maybe if humanity could fully awaken itself to such fundamental realities, then a much-needed paradigm shift toward more mature, compassionate, slower, calmer living would result.

In mid-March 2020, we in the Western world suddenly

found ourselves deep within a global crisis that is likely to persist for at least a couple years. Few people will get through it unscathed, and most will feel intense anxiety at the severe disruption of their lifestyles and the huge economic repercussions. Furthermore, in addition to all the physical health issues, many may experience deep mental suffering and perhaps even loss of loved ones. The cause of this crisis is a perfectly normal biological phenomenon. Thank goodness we humans are not directly responsible—it is not a war, radioactive fallout from a nuclear catastrophe, a terrorist action, or a scientific blunder. No. It’s simply a consequence of a tiny biological organism evolving a particularly virulent and contagious strain of itself while reproducing in its main host species (probably bats). Somehow that strain came in contact with humans as a potential alternative host species, and it has since proved itself highly effective at proliferating in that novel host. Note, however, that we hosts do bear some indirect responsibility in that the new virus’s capacity for proliferation has been greatly enhanced because humans have become so abundant and densely aggregated in cities across the globe, and because so many of us regularly and rapidly travel throughout the planet to meet other people. That’s why it almost immediately became a pandemic rather than just an epidemic.

The speed of the virus’s success has been truly extraordinary. I am still feeling shock at the sudden change and

grief at the loss of regular opportunities in my life that I greatly value. If you have not felt the same way, then you're probably deluding yourself. We humans crave a whole swathe of delusions. Our genetically endowed trait for consciousness allows us to plan ahead and perceive a future—a very useful evolutionary adaptation. But the associated anxieties about what the future will bring (including, ultimately, our own mortality) have led our minds to engage in powerfully comforting delusions of permanence, independence, and ego-driven self-importance. Together, these delusions lead us to fool ourselves that we exert strong control over our lives. Yes, those of us above the “breadline”—who were lucky enough to have been born or grown into some level of privilege—can and do make choices that influence the subsequent direction of our individual paths. Nevertheless the overall courses of each of our lives are primarily determined by factors and events outside our control. For evidence, just review the full course of one of your parents' or grandparents' lives and then reflect on how big a part “chance” has played. The COVID-19 event is a particularly dramatic and severe reminder of this harsh reality, but in fact this fundamental truth has always, and will always, apply—even to our day-to-day lives.

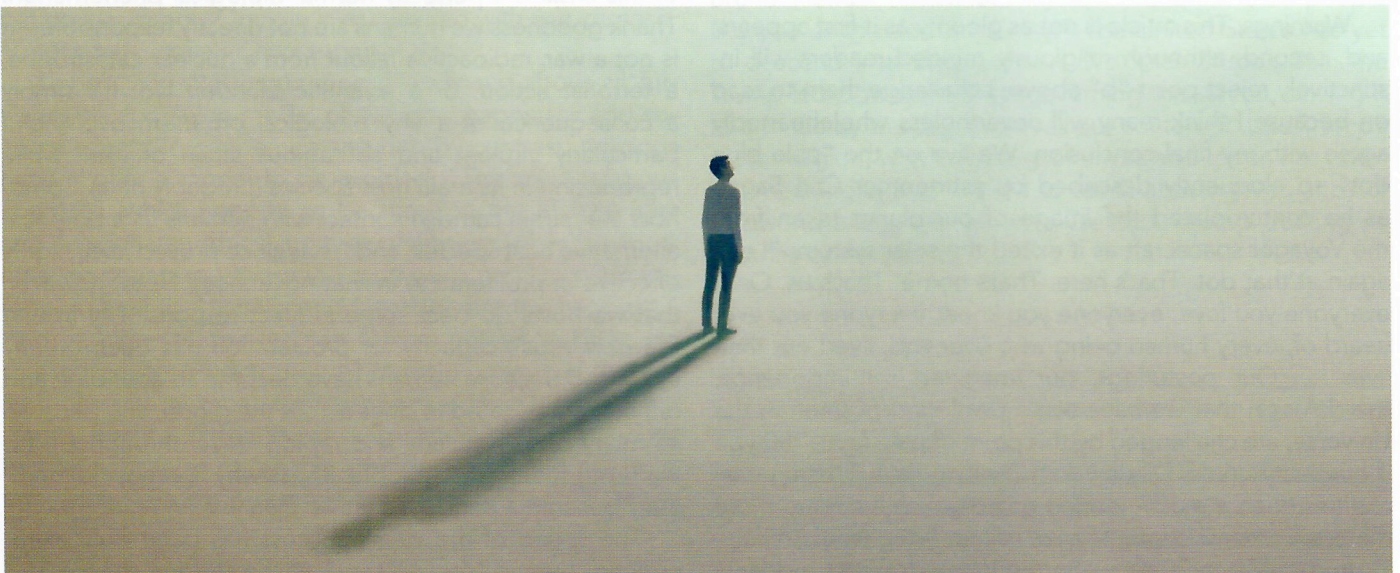
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“What’s the point of it all? There is no point. It’s a foolish question,” exclaims the ailing Herbert Fingarette (University of California emeritus professor of philosophy) in the documentary *Being 97*. Imagine if we could fully embrace this reality much earlier in our lives—imagine the profound

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humility that would result and how it would tame our innate tendency toward ego-driven behavior. Imagine its impact on how we would choose to live: no more wasting our time “sweating the small stuff,” much more time spent “living in the present doing the things that really matter” (quoted from one of my students during a class role-play exercise when she was anticipating her response to being diagnosed with a rapidly progressing terminal illness). Our species is unique in that we know so much about ourselves, our biological origin, and the nature of our existence. For example, we know that our capacity for such existential musings is derived from our species’s highly developed intelligence and consciousness—traits that make us much more behaviorally complex than any other species. We also know that all evolution has been driven by natural and sexual selection for genetically based traits that favor perpetuation of the genes responsible, and that therefore each of our bodies is in effect simply a “vehicle” whose purpose is to propel our genes forward into the next generation. We know that chance as well as random environmental events have played a huge part in all evolution across the “Tree of Life,” including that of our own species. We know that we are living on a small planet spinning around in the middle of nowhere—a “pale blue dot.”

We know that we delude ourselves in many fundamental ways, but we also know that we’re the only species capable of such a realization. We know that perceiving a sense of purpose, meaning, or “something to look forward to” is vital to motivating us through all of life’s unpleas-



antries, such as aspects of work or study perhaps or even just getting out of bed in the morning. At a deeper level, we know that every human life involves profound innate suffering due to both the anxiety and actuality of the inevitable processes of sickness, aging, and death. Hence, we find ourselves in an absurd predicament: we intensely crave an overall purpose that would make such suffering worthwhile (religion addresses that need), but we also know that there is no rational reason to believe that our lives have any ultimate meaning.

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In rendering the myth of Sisyphus, who is eternally condemned to roll a large boulder to the top of a hill only to see it roll back down and then have to start the task anew, Albert Camus proclaimed: “The struggle itself toward the heights must be enough to fill a person’s heart.” Knowing this perspective on our absurd predicament but extending it by also acknowledging that each of us is not alone, I propose that we can devise some lower-level but nevertheless still inherently valuable meaning to life. Each of us is more than an individual; we are part of an interconnected community, and therefore how we treat each other matters as we muddle through our individual lives. Look around you, Sisyphus. See all those other people on their own hills!

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Here we are, together, all of humanity, spinning around on the edge of a planet in the middle of nowhere. Most cultures and religions across human history have developed some form of the “Golden Rule”: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Some have gone a step further to the “Platinum Rule,” which adds in threads of empathy and emotional sensitivity to those of morality and rational thinking: “Do unto others as they would want to have done unto them.” Fully accepting and embracing the harsh reality that life has no ultimate meaning could provide the impetus for each of us to devise a lower-level meaning

to our existences aimed at striving for the combination of compassion and wisdom toward ourselves, each other, and other species. Surely that’s the most valuable goal we can set our minds to—and surely it is worthy and therefore “meaningful,” at least within the confines of what the human mind is capable of.

As we grapple with the COVID-19 crisis, the loss of our “business-as-usual” lifestyles, and the extra time that many of us seem to have at home while the pace of life is slowed by the various public health restrictions, could we reflect and re-emerge with a wholly fresh perspective on how our civilization should function? Our highly evolved capacities for delusion and denial have caused humanity to develop along a path that is far from optimal and that could even be an impending cul-de-sac (a phrase often, forebodingly, translated as “dead end”). Remember climate change, biodiversity loss, tropical deforestation, widespread poverty, famine, and extensive refugee migration, for example. Our aspirations for social justice and equity, universal human dignity, as well as respect for other species and stewardship of the environment have clearly been secondary to the priorities of wealth accumulation, individualism, consumerism (including human exploitation), and resource commodification. The tragedy is that even those of us fortunate enough to be able to live in comfort rarely actually achieve it; most are obsessed with acquiring “more” (wealth, power, control, things to look forward to). We’ve been rushing around like buzzing flies, keeping our minds busy and distracted from the fundamental realities and choosing to ignore rather than to face up to them. In fact, we’ve recently excelled at developing ever “smarter” electronic devices to facilitate that busyness and distraction. Slowing down, paying more attention to the present, and squarely confronting these realities would be a paradigm-shifting step toward more mature living.

We arrogantly chose the name *Homo sapiens* (wise humans) to describe ourselves, but in fact *Homo insanus* (mad humans) would be a much more accurate description of many of our lifestyles and of our species’ progression thus far. Could the COVID-19 crisis be a catalyst toward a profound change in the fundamental values that determine the social, economic, and ecological structures in which we live? Could its impacts help us to live more wisely? Maybe.

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Paul Grogan is a partner and father, as well as a professor of plant and terrestrial ecosystem ecology at the Department of Biology, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. His research expertise is on how the plants, animals, and soil organisms of terrestrial ecosystems interact with each other and with their physical environment. Humans and human activities are an inherent part of ecosystems, and therefore ecosystem-level ecological perspectives are critical to understanding recent global change. Consequently, he has become keenly interested in elucidating the fundamental root causes of our civilization’s current environmental and social sustainability predicaments. In particular, he is focused on the following two interrelated questions: What can biology tell us about our future? and How ought we to be living?