

What Coronavirus Teaches Us About Human Connection

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Allen Mendenhall – March 19, 2020

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“Only connect!” reads the epigraph to E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End*. That phrase possibly encapsulates Forster’s entire philosophy.

It is also contrary to the current commands of our authorities and the mass media: Stay home! Keep inside! Close down! Quarantine! Be afraid! Socially distance! Don’t gather in groups!

However prudent they may be under the circumstances, these imperatives seem strange, confusing, and unnatural. Most of us don’t like alienating ourselves from others for lengthy periods. In times of trouble, we want to *help* others. We want

to *do* something. If the coronavirus has harmed our psychology, if it has bothered or disturbed us, it is probably because we feel so helpless and vulnerable in the face of its transmittable power. The only thing we can do is....*nothing*.

Perhaps there is a silver lining. Absent tangible contact with others, we find communities online and via information technologies. Can't visit your elderly parent or grandparent in the nursing home? Here's a web camera. Can't make that meeting in Boston or Atlanta? No problem: chat on Skype or Zoom or Google. Can't visit the Met? Happily, that opera is livestreamed!

None of this would have been possible, let alone conceivable, a century ago. Free markets and the innumerable innovations of countless entrepreneurs have improved our lives and institutions in ways we take for granted. As bad as circumstances seem, they could be much worse.

It is popular in some circles to caricature those who celebrate free markets as cold, utilitarian ideologues promoting a radically technocratic vision of society that is characterized by atomized individuals ruthlessly committed to wealth maximization at the expense of the less fortunate. Nothing could be further from the truth. Markets are about freedom, coordination, cooperation, collaboration, association, peace, commerce, prosperity, and exchange. They bring people together. They incentivize trade and honest dealing over violence and war, and voluntary consent over coercion and compulsion.

As the stock market tumbles and businesses shut down, as we quit spending money on everyday goods and pleasures, as we restrict travel and shutter restaurants and bars, perhaps we will begin to more fully appreciate the beauty and joy that a free economy enables.

I have spent the last week as a visiting scholar at AIER, enjoying the company of kind, hospitable colleagues while living in the grand and elegant Edgewood Estate. In sharp

contrast to the coronavirus hysteria and panic I've seen in popular media, life here has been calm, friendly, warm, and studious. We dine together for each meal, maintaining the appropriate distance of course. We help each other clean rooms and wash dishes. We meet for cocktail hour each evening after a long day of rigorous research and writing. On these occasions we discuss our work, seek advice and feedback, exchange information and data, and test our theories and arguments. The ideas we bandy about don't end right then and there. They form the basis of articles and of interviews for television and radio. They find their way onto AIER's website, the traffic for which, this week alone, has hit unprecedented levels.

I have noticed during my time here, gradually and by slow degrees, something far more infectious than coronavirus: ideas. Even in self-imposed isolation, the keen intellects at AIER have managed to reach people across the globe, providing unique perspectives and key economic insights to those who most want and need it. A communicable virus has nothing on communicable ideas. AIER has met a negative force with a positive one that is stronger and more lasting.

As governments close borders and impose curfews, as militaries take to the streets to enforce martial law, as universities cancel in-person classes and companies send their employees home, it is important to remember how formidable, vigorous, and enduring ideas can be. Deirdre McCloskey's seminal trilogy—*Bourgeois Virtues*, *Bourgeois Dignity*, and *Bourgeois Equality*—surveys the places and periods in which culture, *shaped by ideas*, facilitated human flourishing to an astonishing extent. Rhetoric and the concepts it conveys are, in her account, the vital factors that explain economic growth in the modern era.

Imagine what could be accomplished if we proliferated ideas about freedom and liberty more widely and quickly than any contagious virus could ever spread. One person comes into contact with another, transmitting an idea, which is passed on

to yet another, who shares it with friends and family. Before long the idea has captured the minds of hundreds, then thousands, then millions, then billions. The contagion is *academic*, not pandemic. It is good, not bad. It is transmissible through any communicative network and doesn't require face-to-face proximity for its rapid diffusion.

Only connect!

This morning, over coffee, I watched the sun rise above the rolling hillsides and heard exuberant birds chirping in the trees. I realized, sitting there, taking in the sights and smells and sounds of the coming spring, that this pandemic, like all upheavals, will pass. Exhilarated, I sensed with growing intensity a feeling not unlike what William Wordsworth must have felt when he wrote that "in this moment there is life and food / For future years."

For many, this is undeniably a dark, sad, and scary hour of sorrow and hardship, loss and pain. You may be mourning or suffering. You may be comforting a sick loved one. You may be locked away in your room. But take solace: light always drives out the darkness, and hope springs eternal.

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