

OUR LASTING LEGACY

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What will be the shape of a post-Covid-19 world? That will be the defining question of the years ahead.

Will we use this unparalleled moment to reevaluate our priorities, or will we strive to get back as quickly as possible to business as usual? Will we have changed or merely endured? Will the pandemic turn out to have been a transformation of history or merely an interruption of it?

That depends on us. Hegel said that the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. Santayana argued to the contrary, that we must learn from history if we are not to be destined to endlessly repeat it. I take my stand with Santayana. If we fail to learn from this global tragedy, we will have betrayed our nature as the animal-that-learns. We will have left this global disaster unredeemed, and we will be unprepared for the next.

I have feared for some time now that in the liberal democracies of the West we have too much "I," too little "We"; too much pursuit of self, too little commitment to the common good. As the coronavirus pandemic began to spread globally, this concern was dramatically illustrated.

Many of the "I"-driven behaviours did great harm, especially in the early stages. There was panic-buying and stockpiling, leaving the elderly, the vulnerable, and the more considerate facing empty supermarket

shelves and pharmacies denuded of some of the most popular drugs.

People flouted social distancing measures and isolation provisions, putting their own convenience ahead of the interests of others. When a great concentration of coronavirus cases was located in northern Italy and the Italian government announced a lockdown there, tens of thousands of Italians fled to the south to avoid the confinement, focused on their own freedom of movement and indifferent to the fact that they might be endangering the health, even the lives, of others.

Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly the contradiction at the heart of extreme liberal individualism. Some people who ignored the guidelines said that they were exercising their right to freedom. But we have no right to freedom if exercising that right harms the freedom of others. Liberal democratic freedom is collective and depends on self-restraint. A society in which everyone feels free to do what they want is not a free society. It is not a society at all. It is anarchy.

Against this was the inspiration provided by the people prepared to work for the good of others: the doctors, nurses, and other medical staff, the people who stocked the shelves of supermarkets and pharmacies, the delivery drivers and others who (often at risk to themselves) placed the common good over self-interest, who were driven by a sense of "We are all in this together" rather than "What's in it for me?" They were not the best paid in society. Many were among the low-

est-paid workers. Yet their value to all of us was immense. We could not have survived without them.

There was a spontaneous outbreak of neighbourliness in all directions. Streets throughout Britain formed WhatsApp groups so that people could message others with texts like, "I'm going shopping. Does anyone want anything?" Our eight-year-old granddaughter, of her own initiative, knocked on the doors in her street, saying, "We live at Number 12. If you need anything, just knock on our door." Communities and congregations started getting in touch with everyone they could, especially the elderly, the isolated, and the vulnerable, keeping their spirits high and helping them obtain food and medicines. The better angels of our nature have rarely been more in evidence than in those strained and lonely weeks of lockdown.

The pandemic vividly showed how "I"-behaviour harms, while "We"-behaviour heals. It also helped us understand why there has been so much individualism of late. For decades, the great challenges we have faced have been individual, not collective. But the virus affected all of us and depended on all of us practicing certain self-restraints for the benefit of others.

What will be the lasting legacy of this extraordinary time that has brought so much disease and death, suffering and pain, isolation and dislocation, and an economic recession of a magnitude not seen for almost a century? Will we seek to return to the way things were, or will we see a once-in-a-lifetime chance to build something new? Twentieth-century history offers two alternatives. The first is the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918–1920, which is thought to have claimed up to 50 million lives—between two and three times as many as the First World War

that had just ended.

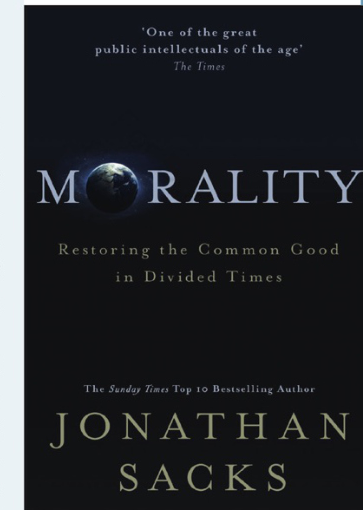
There was little if any growth in "We"-consciousness following this global catastrophe. In the 1920s, Britain and America reverted to the strongly "I"-oriented mood of the Edwardian age. It was the era of the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, and The Great Gatsby, of wild dances and wilder parties, of people bent on forgetting what had happened in an extended escape from reality.

The outcome was Britain's General Strike of 1926, the Great Crash of 1929, a decade of economic depression, social strife and widespread misery, and the rise of populism, nationalism, and fascism. A mere twenty-one years after "the war to end all wars," the world was at war again. If you fail to learn from history, you find yourself repeating it. A quite different scenario was played out at the end of World War II. This time, there was a deep sense that much needed to change. There were too many inequalities. There was too much poverty. What emerged was an intense feeling of social solidarity, something that often emerges when a group experiences threat and collective danger. A consensus began to take shape that when the war was over, society had to become more caring, cohesive, and compassionate. The scars of the 1920s and 1930s had to be healed.

In the United States this led, among other measures, to the benefits, financial and educational, for ex-servicemen and ex-service-women, known as the GI Bill of 1944. There was new legislation governing labour relations, a minimum wage, Social Security, and disability and unemployment insurance.

In Britain the result was the creation of the welfare state, a system of social insurance for everyone regardless of income or age. The 1944 Education Act provided compulsory free secondary education for all. In 1948, the National Health Service was born. These were revolutionary changes that reshaped Britain from then to today, and almost certainly they would not have taken place without the collective experience of war. The result was seven and a half decades of peace, and in Britain a far more classless society.

Applied to the post-coronavirus future, I believe we should follow the prece-



dent of the post-World War II scenario, not that of the years following World War I and the flu pandemic. My hope is that we emerge from this long dark night with an enhanced sense of "We" in five dimensions.

I hope we will see a stronger sense of human solidarity. Rarely if ever has virtually all humanity faced the same dangers and the same fears at the same time. We have been through the same trial together, a trial brought about by a virus that knows no boundaries of colour or culture, class or creed. It is hard not to feel the force of John Donne's famous words, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind."

I hope we will have a keener sense of human vulnerability. A microscopic virus has brought the whole of humanity to its knees despite all our affluence, scientific knowledge, and technological power. We need to retain that sense of humility in the face of nature and its power, and this should bring more sharply home the urgent need for collective action on climate change, which could be the next great global tragedy.

I hope we strengthen our sense of social responsibility. It was conspicuous that the countries that performed best in responding to the pandemic—South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan—are high-trust societies, where people have faith in the government to be honest with them and do what needs to be done and where there is a strong sense of civic duty, as well as rights.

The economic challenge of the years ahead may be even greater than the

health challenge of the pandemic itself, and this will be a time to reconsider the morals of the market. Writing in *The Economist* ("The World After Covid-19," April 16 2020), former governor of the Bank of England Mark Carney wrote that "we have been moving from a market economy to a market society." That must change. "In this crisis," he said, "we know we need to act as an interdependent community not independent individuals, so the values of economic dynamism and efficiency have been joined by those of solidarity, fairness, responsibility and compassion."

I hope that we will retain the spirit of kindness and neighbourliness that humanised our fate during the months of lockdown and isolation when people thought of others, not themselves, living out what William Wordsworth called "the best portion of a good man's life / His little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love." Those who did these acts discovered, as we almost always do, that in lifting others, we ourselves are lifted.

Finally, I hope we will emerge from this time of distance and isolation with an enhanced sense of what most of us have missed—the "We" that happens whenever two or more people come together face-to-face and soul touches soul, the "We" that is at the heart of our being as social animals and that can never be fully replicated by electronic media, however brilliant and effective they are.

Hegel or Santayana: those are the alternatives. As the world recovers from the pandemic, we can work to rebuild our societies the way they were, or we can use this rare moment to enhance the structures of our togetherness, a togetherness that had been weakened by too much pursuit of self. The choice is ours, and the time is now.

This article is an edited extract from "Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times" by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, published by Hodder Faith in March 2020 and was a Sunday Times Top 10 Non-Fiction Bestseller.

