

In a Plague-Time, We Need Truth and Experts



First in a series, Notes from a Plague-Time

How is it possible that our life—not only in America but in all the world—can change in the course of just weeks? How is it possible that mere life can suddenly become a truly existential and inextricable matter of Life-and-Death? And how, as a nation, do we shake our normal dysfunction and get to the upside and save ourselves? Can we?

So many questions—and driving them all is a microscopic leviathan, the novel coronavirus, exploding into a worldwide pandemic, with the deadly respiratory illness COVID-19 as its prize. It dawns on us, on me, that we are, in the clichéd blink of an eye, thrust into an entirely new era. Not for nothing is this virus called “novel.”

Like everybody else who is not an epidemiologist, I start in this new era with a blank page and a sense of dread—though epidemiologists going on TV to explain this crisis to a panicked public also, under their clinical demeanor, seem to exude dread: They know, they can see, the awfulness coming at us. Solidarity in dread.

And yet: Soon enough, it comes to me the need to grapple, to manufacture hope and courage, to achieve balance and exercise uncommon common sense, to acquit myself with dignity, honor, smarts, and, if I can manage it, wit—and not, please God, to react like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, like a “harassed mouse.” In short, to get to the other side—not to Heaven, as eulogists put it, but get to the other side of this deadly scourge. To cheat Death and emerge into more Life.

I mean to fill these blank pages with notes, impressions, things learned and things discarded—in general, things useful and constructive to this new era. I come as a commentator and an artist, but principally as a human being, in solidarity with my fellow human beings. Since it is not useful, I will not indulge in polemic—except when President Donald Trump commits yet another life-threatening act—nor will I spin a literary performance. I will also—attenzione—quote from the commonplace books I have filled over a lifetime, wherein I enter wisdom and guidance from past masters. For example, when epidemic became pandemic, Dostoevsky’s “harassed mouse” came instantly to mind. So did Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nothing so astonishes as common sense and plain dealing.” I mean to put Art to work, while charting Life in this new era.

As the Chinese say, “The longest journey begins with the first step.” Here goes, first with a commentary—“In a Plague-Time, We Need Truth and Experts.”

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If ever there was the absolute need for straight talk and getting real, it is in the life-and-death coronavirus pandemic we are experiencing now.

In brief, what do we need to save ourselves? Truth and expertise.

Yet—sadly, infuriatingly, but let us hope not tragically—what we get from the Trump White House is messaging driven by Trump’s reelection agenda and his absolute need to look good and *always* be right. Meaning: Trump’s lying and dissembling have gone into overdrive. To watch his press briefings, with the experts he must know he needs arrayed around him, is to see lying and truth-telling in real-time combat. Too often, the lying “wins.”

But sometimes, truth-telling wins. Last week, when Trump crowed at a news briefing, nearly a daily event now, that an anti-malaria drug was being repurposed for the coronavirus—*against which, as of now, there is no vaccine or treatment, thus the public dread*—the head of the Food and Drug Administration stepped forth and said, No, such drug was not forthcoming.

Earlier, at a White House meeting, after Trump announced a coronavirus vaccine was coming soon, Dr. Anthony Fauci, respected director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and now the face of the Administration's cohort of experts, leaned in and said, No, such a vaccine can not be ready for another year or year-and-a-half. It was not what Trump wanted to hear, nor what the public wanted to hear, but it is fact—the truth. Dr. Fauci did the same again when Trump tried, again, with his repurposed anti-malaria drug.

But then, what can we expect from a president whose lies are an established habit and whose number *The Washington Post* now tabulates above 16,000 in the three years since his inauguration? Pre-pandemic, we had been immersed in Trumpian untruth, its own kind of contagion. The first casualty of such a habit, and the most precious loss in a leader, is trust: How can we trust a leader whose word we cannot take? Especially in a crisis? And not to forget his distaste for expertise.

But now, in this pandemic, Trump's lying could literally kill—by giving out bad information (for example, that it's O.K. to go to work if sick: not true), downplaying the lethality of the virus, questioning the death rates across the globe, absurdly playing up his own expertise in epidemiology. But enough about Trump, who we hope will be no more than a speed-bump in the quest for a solution.

The hard truth (there's that word again: truth) is that, pre-pandemic, the experts did let us down, notably the once-vaunted Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, specifically in coronavirus testing. The CDC performed well in the H1N1 and Zika outbreaks, sending test kits to all 50 states and over 100 countries. But with the novel coronavirus, its failure—faulty tests, faulty distribution—leaves the public

dangerously unprotected, thus nullifying the CDC's claim of disease control and prevention. (The CDC has been suffering funding cutbacks for years.)

For without being tested, an infected person can unknowingly infect another, who in turn unknowingly infects another, etc., etc., leading to... pandemic. Which is why doctors, upon learning of the dearth in testing, are quoted saying, "We're all going to get it" and "We are at war with no ammo." (I think of my late father, a doctor admired by colleagues for his diagnostic skills, connecting the dots between no testing and mass infection and, in his quiet way, concluding the same thing.)

But now, in this crisis, surely our salvation lies with the experts and their expertise—those researchers in labs around the globe racing, Manhattan Project-style, to develop a vaccine. Those epidemiologists and other experts running the data to advocate the strategy now increasingly followed by the world's governments, i.e., to "flatten the curve" of infection and prevent a rapid peaking of cases causing entire health systems to collapse. And, crucially, those medical personnel, doctors and nurses, now on the front lines in hospitals, treating the growing numbers of the infected and sick—and, "with no ammo," risking their own lives in the process.

And the experts who were ignored before, but whose warnings came true: They merit rehearing, for there *will* be another outbreak. In 2018, the 100-year anniversary of the 1918 flu pandemic, Dr. Luciana Borio, then director for medical and biodefense at the White House's National Security Council, told a symposium that "the threat of pandemic flu is our number-one health security concern." The next day Trump's national security adviser John Bolton shut down the NSC's pandemic unit, of which Dr. Borio was a part. Dr. Beth Cameron, also a member who was fired, in a *Washington Post* op-ed outlines how that office could have coordinated current efforts.

And other experts within government (many of whom have left or been fired): They point the way. In a simulation code-named "Crimson Contagion" conducted by the Trump administration's Department of

Health and Human Services Jan.-Aug. of last year, the draft report (previously unreported until broken by *The New York Times*) lays out a scenario “now playing out in all-too-real fashion,” including the outbreak’s start in China, shortages of medical equipment, command confusion. Yet, this warning went unheeded. Dr. Fauci in mid-2018 told Congress he worried about a flu pandemic. Trump keeps saying nobody thought this—a pandemic—could happen. But: Experts did—a whole universe of them. (What is lacking is an expert *strategist* to pull all the expertise together—leadership a president should provide.)

And experts like the Chinese doctor, Li Wenliang—who, months ago (Dec. 30), blew the whistle on the novel virus he was seeing in his ophthalmology practice; who, for his singular public service, was threatened with arrest by the Chinese authorities; who later contracted the virus himself and, tragically, died; who, belatedly, has been exonerated by his government. Until he died, Dr. Li intended to return to “the front line”: “The epidemic is still spreading, and I don’t want to be a deserter.” Dr. Li was 34.

Finally: Complicating our collective defense in this battle is our extreme political polarization. For as dangerous as viral contagion is, so in its way is ideological contagion.

For decades now, conservatives have, for their own complicated reasons, assaulted expertise, especially that exercised by government “bureaucrats.” And a majority of Republicans continues to repeat Trump’s early response to the coronavirus as the Democrats’ “new hoax” and stand by him. What a shame—what a crime?—if a disbeliever were to infect a fellow countryman who is taking the experts’ warnings seriously. Bret Stephens, conservative columnist at the *Times*, takes his cohort to task: “The coronavirus has exposed the falsehood of so many notions Trump’s base holds about the presidency: that experts are unnecessary; that hunches are a substitute for knowledge; that competence in administration is overrated; that every criticism is a hoax.... Above all, it has devastated the conceit that having an epic narcissist in the White House is a riskless proposition at a time of extreme risk.”

What will it take—Death?—to convince the disbelieving of this virus’ lethality?

Back to facts: Here is how the public can protect itself and, doing so, help “flatten the curve” of infection. The guidelines are straightforward—self-isolation, or “sheltering in place,” until further notice; maintaining a distance of six feet from others, or “social distancing,” *if* one must go out in public; and lots and lots of hand-washing (I am laving like Lady Macbeth at this point, but without the guilt). And of course avoid the infection of bad information and conspiracy theories by consulting the World Health Organization (WHO), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the CDC, your state or county health department.

Today’s lead headline in *The New York Times* reads, “The Virus Can Be Stopped, but Only With Harsh Steps, Experts Say.” The experts give us hope (and guidelines, above).

While not every truth-teller is an expert, by definition every expert is a truth-teller. It has long been said—an ancient truism—that the truth shall make you free. In a deadly pandemic, the truth—and experts and their expertise—will keep you alive.

To Life!

Other resources on the coronavirus pandemic: See the Johns Hopkins global tracker. See information posted at The New England Journal of Medicine, International Journal of Epidemiology, Harvard Medical School, and STAT. See dedicated coverage at The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, The Economist, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, and Politico. For ongoing TV coverage, see “The PBS NewsHour,” “Amanpour and Company” (PBS), “The Rachel Maddow Show” (MSNBC), and “Fareed Zakaria GPS” (CNN).

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