

CORONA

A crisis of
imagination,
a crisis of
intimacy

James Bampffield & Dr. Marc Gafni

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A crisis has swept over our planet. As the virus has woven itself into the fabric of society, so have many aspects of our ordinary lives unravelled. We may be in fear about our health and that of our dear ones. We may find ourselves locked down at home, we may have found that our work has ground to a halt. Almost certainly, many of our plans have disintegrated like sandcastles in the oncoming tide. This wind of collective change is probably the strongest many of us in the developed world have felt in our lifetime.

Life feels different. The world feels a different place. Instability and uncertainty are here to stay for a while.

In times of crisis, there are two equally important responses. The first is immediate and practical: help and protect those most affected. Attend to the frontline of suffering and disruption. Acknowledge and feel the hardships round the world, acknowledge the privileged bubble in which many of us live - just having a garden is a massive bonus right now. Do what we need to do, take social responsibility.

The second imperative of a crisis is to make sense of it and learn from it. Crisis is an 'evolutionary driver.' Crisis is a potential birth. If we look at the way evolution has worked in all domains - biologically, psychologically, culturally, politically, economically, spiritually - it has often taken a crisis to

precipitate the next level of development.

We are suggesting here that crisis at every level of reality is of two kinds: a "crisis of intimacy" and a "crisis of imagination"¹. Crisis of intimacy points to a new level of relationship, crisis of imagination refers to a new perspective, a new form, a new system, a new constellation of parts. Emergency must lead to emergence.

In order for this learning to happen, in order for us to re-imagine our world and create new possibilities, we need to be able to make sense of what is happening. We need to use and develop a 'common sense': we need to start with facts and build these facts into a compelling story. Facts alone are rarely persuasive, stories not based on facts are rarely trustworthy. A story can have a meaning, whereas facts only point towards themselves. We are also saying that not all interpretations and stories are equal. Some account for more of the facts and offer greater depth. Which one day, we hope, will be replaced by other better interpretations...

¹ Crisis of Intimacy, See Marc Gafni and Barbara Marx Hubbard, *The Intimate Universe, Why Only A New Story Can Heal the Global Intimacy Disorder*, (forthcoming) 2020, and on Crisis of Imagination see Marc Gafni and Kristina Kincaid, *A Return to Eros*, 2018

The central point of this essay is that some hard lessons need to be learnt from this crisis, sacrifices will need to be made, and these lessons and sacrifices will bring us exactly the changes we need to grow up, liberate ourselves from certain destructive patterns, and achieve a better tomorrow for all. On an interior level, here is an opportunity to release a new wave of love which is truly inclusive and transcends the usual barriers created by our many differences - of money, of race, of colour, of species, and so on. On the exterior level, there is an opportunity here to re-imagine and re-build the political and economic systems that have partly created the problem.

What we are offering is essentially a spiritual perspective that is part of a spiritual story, which includes but is not limited to the physical sciences. Our working definition of a spiritual perspective is that life and the universe cannot only be explained by physical laws, and objective proof is not the only source of knowledge. In other words, we are not just a bunch of atoms in a random universe, and we don't only arrive at truth through microscopes and measurement. A useful distinction between these two kinds of knowing is by naming them the 'exterior' and 'interior' sciences.

There are 3 key strands to our spiritual story/perspective:

- 1. Intimacy**
- 2. Equanimity**
- 3. Conscious evolution**

Origins

First we need to understand the etiology of the virus. We need to gather as many facts as possible. As far as we can tell, it started in one of the 'wet markets' in poor areas of China, as have other viruses, such as SARS. The conditions in these markets are horrendous both in terms of treatment of the animals themselves and in terms of sanitation. The reason they are called wet markets is because a lot of water is needed to wash away all the blood, entrails and faeces from different animals being slaughtered. Some of the animals are the product of 'wildlife farming', providing alternative meat for poor people, other animals are exotic, often illegally traded, and used as ingredients for tonics, sex-enhancers, bodybuilding-boosters - none of which have any scientifically-proven value whatsoever.

Many of these animals are declared 'natural resources' by the Chinese government - meaning you can do what you want with them. China is one of the few countries not to have a law against cruelty to animals. Most studies think now that there is an intermediary host between the bat and humans, most likely the pangolin - which happens to be the most illegally traded mammal in the world.

In other words, the virus is most likely coming out of a highly 'unnatural', highly abusive environment. And before we are tempted to adopt any kind of moral superiority to the Chinese, we must look at the horrendous conditions for animals in much of our own meat industry and the untold harm that factory farming has caused the environment.

Let's also not forget that diseases have historically been of positive interest to various governments in the world who seek to develop biological weapons in order to kill and maim members of their fellow species.

The overarching point here is that at key moments there is a 'failure of intimacy'. What we mean by this is that our circle of care and compassion reaches a barrier, beyond which our love does not reach. We have no intimacy with what is beyond our particular barriers, we have no shared identity - we simply don't care, or not enough. We only

care enough about ourselves and our own tribe or grouping.

All atrocities occur as a result of a failure of intimacy: when it comes to the crunch, the Nazi cannot feel the Jew, the rapist cannot feel the one who is being raped. The perpetrator cannot place themselves on the inside of the victim. The privileged cannot always place themselves on the inside of the disadvantaged.

Whether it be the feeding of poor populations with unsanitary food, unspeakable cruelty to animals, ethnocentric nationalism that excludes the rest of the world, excessive exploitation and devastation of nature - such phenomena are not just topics of ethical debate, they are failures of intimacy, failures of relationship.

Before we all lose the will to live on realizing the extent of this 'global intimacy disorder', we should also note just how much progress has been made. In general, animals are better treated, many forms of oppression have been reduced, violence is more widely condemned, and far fewer people die of disease. On the other hand, this outbreak is a sign that much more needs to be done: our hearts are not yet big enough. And the stakes seem to be getting higher and higher.

Global Vulnerability

Of course this is not the first time the world has suffered from a pandemic and there have been much worse ones than this - the bubonic plague and the Spanish flu epidemic, to name but two. The difference is that the ease of mobility, both in terms of people and cargo, plus an enormously inflated world population, many of whom live closer and closer together in massive urban sprawls, has rendered us much more vulnerable to infectious diseases. Furthermore it is becoming abundantly clear that increased global connectedness is rendering us more vulnerable on many fronts - ecologically, economically, politically and socially. To use the modern expression we are becoming increasingly less 'antifragile'. Our systems optimize for efficiency and not resiliency. We are obsessed with productivity and driven by a win-lose matrix.

But that is just the beginning of the story. If we really sense what is happening, we need to see Covid-19 as a dress rehearsal for other even worse disasters that may well befall us and our descendants. When we use the word 'dress rehearsal', we do not in any way want to diminish the intense levels of suffering and disruption it has and will cause, but we want to make a distinction between catastrophic risk and existential risk. Sooner or later, we will almost certainly be faced with a disaster that not only causes horrific suffering but also poses a risk for the survival of our species. Not to mention the survival of other species, which at the moment are growing extinct at a rate of one every 20 minutes, or 50% over the last 40 years, mainly due to human intervention.

Sense making

Let's first look at some of the ways sense is currently being made of the crisis.

Scientism/materialism

Embedded in the exterior sciences, the scientific-materialist view is often perceived to be in opposition to religious or spiritual views. In so-called developed societies the scientist worldview is the most dominant perspective in these days of secularization: ideas of truth and knowledge are increasingly being reduced to the exterior sciences.

Not surprisingly, therefore, most of the sense-making we read about and see on the screen belongs to this paradigm. Data-gathering, facts, graphs, prognostics, and so on. From the exterior perspective, the virus simply needs to be understood biologically, treated and vaccinated against. The physical trail of the virus is followed and measures need to be taken to minimize its recurrence. Understand, predict and control. The Chinese government have already closed down the wet markets - temporarily anyway - and even the Trump administration is unlikely again to slash budget and personnel from the office created after the 2016 Ebola outbreak to deal with pandemics, who were, ironically, working in close partnership with China.

These exterior measures are absolutely proper and necessary: of course governments need to take far greater practical responsibility for possible future global disasters.

The reason why that is not enough is because these measures do not include the interior

sciences, and the story is a poor one. People won't change sufficiently on the inside. Just think about this in your life. Everything you do comes from a set of beliefs from within which you are creating your reality. The values and beliefs that make up your story inform every choice you make. That is why sustainable exterior change will not happen unless we first change on the inside. To change on the inside we must evolve the story from within which we create our reality.

If we don't care about animals, our change of behaviour will be cosmetic and tend to happen only under duress - which is better than nothing but not enough. If we don't care about groups of people who are 'other', and exist beyond our barrier of care and compassion, our actions and those of our governments will be very limited. If we don't (re-)learn to love nature from our hearts, our fundamental relationship to nature won't change. We need intrinsic motivation, as well as extrinsic motivation. Any organisational leader will tell you that extrinsic motivation in employees is not enough - there needs also to be an inner sense of purpose, an inner sense of contributing to something worthwhile. We need to be acting out of some kind of genuine love that is part of our very identity, not mere obedience.

Lastly, the scientific-materialist approach is conducted 'out there' and in (to most of us) remote political, legal and scientific circles and rarely engages us personally. We don't need to change. They need to change and then we choose whether to follow or not. By cultivating our capacity to grow up and love, we can all take leadership. If we think the only significant solutions to this problem are political, then not only are we deeply deluded, we are being moral cowards. Your consciousness also needs to change, my consciousness, our consciousness needs to change. Politics is personal and it begins with you and me.

So by all means let's listen to the experts of the exterior sciences to help combat the virus, just as we should when it comes to climate change and the other disasters waiting to happen in the physical world, but let us not be seduced by the story of scientism which will never touch our hearts and never bring the new, deeper level of intimacy the world so needs.

Religious and Alternative Spiritual Interpretations

In the spiritual domain, various highly popular videos and messages have been circulating which see the crisis as something to be grateful for - purely a marvellous opportunity for change. A kind of gift from nature to wake us up. Although there is some truth in this in the sense that every crisis is indeed an opportunity and crisis is indeed an evolutionary driver, the suggestion that we should be grateful has a deeply unsavoury taste to those who are on the frontline of the suffering. A good litmus test for any message of this kind is: How would it go down in an intensive-care unit of a hospital? How would it go down if people who have just lost a parent were to hear that they should be grateful to the virus?

Any sense-making that does not include the immediate needs of the individual is cruelly incomplete. Any meta-level or story that ignores the suffering on the ground is callous and superficial. We cannot explain suffering away, we need to face and include it.

Beneath the broad umbrella of new age spirituality, another way that suffering is often explained and made sense of is through the popular lens of the Laws of Attraction. We create our own world, we are solely responsible for what we attract into our lives. Our thoughts create our reality. In other words, we bring suffering - and happiness - on ourselves. Although there is some truth in this and for sure our inner world affects our outer world (and vice-versa), it is a hopelessly simplistic and partial truth.

Disturbingly, this perspective actually mirrors traditional religious interpretations of suffering: you suffer because you have sinned. Even in contemporary society we hear countless fundamentalist statements to this effect: HIV was a punishment for the sin of homosexuality, 9/11 a punishment for the iniquitous ways of NYC, and just recently the pastor of a 14000-strong church in Dallas and regular Fox news contributor said every disaster, including this one, stems ultimately from human sin. Many of us cringe at such statements, but the essence of the new age interpretations above is the same: you are responsible for your suffering. So the children of the dying parents in the care home, whom they can't visit because of the lockdown, are responsible for their own suffering?

They have somehow attracted that situation, or somehow thought it into existence? There is an obscene side to this perspective: apart from being heartless to those suffering, it strips suffering of all dignity and is these days called victim-shaming. Suffering and horror pose a serious challenge to any spiritual worldview. It's called the problem of evil and the religious world has been wrestling with it for millennia. None of the above interpretations come even close to solving the mystery of suffering and ours does not come close to even claiming such a solution.

But we do need a story that will inspire change, a story that is based on facts but touches the heart. A story that is confident but not dogmatic.

Conscious Evolution

The worst thing that could happen is that after the virus everything returns to normal. If ever there is a time for a new normal to emerge, this must be it. Throughout the lockdown, we (James and Marc) have felt two very different movements within us. On the one hand, we feel this strong yin movement inwards, a slowing down, a pause, a return home in ourselves. If we accept totally the situation we are given, if we embrace this disruption rather than fight it, we notice strong bursts of creativity, new ideas and practices being born. We are meeting new, emerging parts of ourselves - with delight, however sinister the context. We feel the spicy yang risk of the novelty and the excitement that brings. This a chance for me to change. This is a chance for us to change.

One of the most important assumptions about life we are proposing here is that crisis is an 'evolutionary driver'. If you look back on your life, look how often you have come out of a crisis stronger, wiser, more mature. The horrific crisis of the Bubonic plague in the fourteenth century led to the rise of modernity and the scientific revolution, the horrific crisis of WW2 led to the formation of the UN and a new worldview of transnational collaboration. We are not talking about a direct chain of cause and effect here, we are saying that a crisis forces us to re-assess and re-imagine a better life or world. Plato is saying something similar in his famous dictum that necessity is the mother of invention.

So the vital question right now for anyone with a spiritual sensitivity, anyone with a social conscience is: What is trying to emerge right now in me, what is trying to emerge in society? We need to be courageous enough to allow our previous identity to be shaken. Who am I if I am not a successful businessman? Who am I if my status is taken away? Who am I if I can't travel round the world anymore? Who am I if I am not part of a physical team? Who am I as a cook if I can't get hold of my usual ingredients?

When we ask the question, What is trying to emerge in me and society, the position we are taking in regard to evolution here is more radical than it sounds. We are not just asking the question: How can I can make changes in my life and in the world as a result of this crisis? We are not just appealing to a sense of personal will and personal sense of responsibility. We are saying that if we allow ourselves to be disrupted, if we make space for the new, evolution will actually work through us. We are evolution in action. We are more than contributors, we are embodiments of evolution. In order to comprehend this, we have to transcend our ideas of existing as a separate self. There is nothing grandiose about it, indeed it is humbling and awe-inspiring that there is something at work that is so much bigger than us and yet values us, uses us, speaks and acts through us.

We are part of evolution whether we know it or not, but to become a conscious part of evolution induces a different level of intensity and impact. This is the emerging story that we are espousing: given the massive leap in global connectivity, we are able for the first time in history to influence the evolution of culture and society in a large-scale, conscious way. That's why we need to get a good story out there. Evolution does not follow

pre-destined course, it is not governed by physical laws in the way that matter is. Where is the mathematical equation that predicts what happens after homo sapiens Interior Evolution.

If our part in the puzzle of conscious evolution is to be a noble one, our actions have to come from a trustworthy place within ourselves - our highest values, our deepest state of being. That is why we are saying that a spiritual perspective is needed. Inner work is need for the outer work to be truly beneficial.

Heart

If we really look, we are faced every day with a bewildering juxtaposition of extreme suffering and extreme beauty. Outrageous pain, outrageous love. Right here in my garden, virtually every day of the lockdown has provided a teeming tapestry of budding flowers and blossoms. As news comes in of yet more death and hardship, the songs of the birds only seem to get more exuberant. Every story of woe is matched by a story of heroism and devotion. Any sense we try and make must surely include a reality which seems to pull is in two directions. Our hearts need to open both to the pain and the joy. We cry out of one side of the mouth and we laugh out of the other side.

Welcome to life.

We dare to be delighted even in the midst of pain, for we cannot live without delight. How many people have we heard saying: "I actually feel great, but I feel guilty about it." No, let yourself feel great! But leave space in your reality for the many who don't feel great and are racked with fear. Don't turn away from what is going on outside your own bubble.

"A crisis forces us to re-assess and re-imagine a better life or world."

And we need to realize that actually the world is always like this, not just during Corona times. It is just that the bubble of safety, certainty and comfort in which many of us live has been pricked by this tiny virus. The world is ridden with misery all the time, we just don't let it touch us. Most of it happens beyond the circumference of our care and compassion. Strangely, we also seem to have a joy threshold within our bubble too. A life led mostly on automatic pilot, rushing from one task to another, hopping from one click or swipe to the next, worrying about this and that, we have also protected ourselves from an ecstatic life. In reality, many of us never really cry from pain or joy.

Science itself is wonderful and is a life-saver. Unfortunately, it has turned into a story called scientism, which has dissected reality and led us to perceive ourselves as a separate self, separate from others, separate from nature: a solitary blob of consciousness (considered by many scientists even to be illusory!) in an essentially inanimate, purposeless, random universe. This is not a great story to foster intimacy. We are not truly intimate with the world around us. We don't feel it, resonate with it, share a sufficient sense of common identity.

Right now, we can use the crisis to step into a broader, deeper intimacy with the world, with no part left out. Our sense of family needs to extend across the barriers of our usual identity group. As so often in a crisis, on the medical front line this is already happening, or on the street balconies in Italy, or in the many, many online offerings of help.

The first step is to let ourselves be affected, let ourselves be disturbed, let ourselves feel uncertain. Vulnerability is needed to melt the shell that has built up round our hearts. Vulnerability, when accepted, creates the soil from which the perspective of love can grow. If not accepted, it will lead to fight, flight or freeze.

So the first step is for each one of us to use this break of routine to perform some new act of kindness. We need to become more outrageous in our love, take risks in reaching out (non-physically for now!) to others, helping others - not just family members. Let our sense of family grow in all directions!

"Vulnerability, when accepted, creates the soil from which the perspective of love can grow."

This not just a concept or an ethical standpoint. You can literally walk out of your door and see the world with the heart's eye. This is not merely a mental decision, it is a form of spiritual practice. A spiritual practice that requires no religious orthodoxy.

The business world, for example, is under extreme pressure at the moment. The whole commercial network has been shaken to its core, people are losing jobs, companies are on the verge of collapse. This is the kind of time when people tend to discard their highest values - when survival of self and organizational tribe become the only goal. If human culture and collective psychology is to evolve, this is exactly the time when our highest values need to be lived. That is what defines heroism - and we can all be heroes in some small way. We can't just ditch a long-time client, supplier, partner, associate without dialogue, without trying to find a middle way where the pain of the situation is shared. We have to share our loaf of bread even if it is our last. Of course we need to protect 'our own', including our own bodies, but that doesn't mean we have to become defensive. Let's not allow an appropriate level of self-protection to stifle our innate generosity which yearns to be activated.

The growing science of positive psychology shows us that generosity not only helps others but makes us happier. Not that we need any academic research to tell us that - duhhh! And our happiness is very much connected to our social contact, our ability to reach out and connect. And apparently - according to both psychological and

neurological studies - one of the most acute social pleasures is caused by 'fleeting contact with strangers'. Just the exchange of a smile while walking the dog, just a brief chat in the queue outside the supermarket, these are key paths to pleasure and ways to grow our capacity for love!

Our assumption here is that each person is not in essence separate from the natural world and all that is in it. The barriers and boundaries we have created are a mental and social construct. They may have served a purpose, may have corresponded to a certain phase of our evolution, but now in these fragile global times these divisions need to be loosened. We need to take a jump into a new kind of global intimacy where no person and no part of nature is left out. We need to feel ourselves as a planetary whole, which is seamless but not featureless. Every wave is different but there is only one ocean. This is an interior movement, it doesn't mean you have to go and visit every country. And it has nothing to do with globalization, whose economic expression is not remotely connected to the heart and has almost certainly caused some of the problems we are faced with now. The appropriate exterior movement might be in the opposite direction: buy local, find holiday destinations that are driveable, stay closer to home.

Care and compassion for all sentient beings, to use the Buddhist language, is something that can be cultivated and practiced. There is a huge body of knowledge on this subject within all wisdom traditions, from shamanic indigenous ritual to Tibetan Buddhism to the Kabbalah.

This sense of unity does not exclude difference. The glory of the human condition at its deepest level is not only that we are not separate, we do belong, we are part of something bigger, but we are also each unique. We are all different but we all come from the same cosmic breath. Right now, there is some gift you can bring to world that could only come from you, only have your flavour, only be signed with your signature.

The one-world, one-planet, we-are-all-connected perspective has to change from a mental concept into a felt reality - which takes inner work.

The Still Point in the Storm

Our happiness and our capacity for right action is not only connected to our hearts. Our actions will be trustworthy only if they come from an open heart and an empty or equanimous mind – what has been called True Self in many spiritual traditions. The disruption of our daily routines and an enforced lockdown for many is the perfect chance to develop a more contemplative approach to life. The pace of our usual lifestyle for many of us is insane - also in the literal sense of the word: unhealthy. And even if we are now more still physically, our minds can be working overtime, and we are bombarded by an addictive avalanche of information and digital input. We need to find some inner spaciousness, some clarity of consciousness, a connection with a deeper existential reality.

Once again, this is an interior movement, and once again it is something that can be cultivated and practiced. The interior science around contemplative practice is impressive and easily accessible, supported by countless methodologies, coming from a wide variety of spiritual traditions, both eastern and western, both modern and pre-modern. Forget the various religious dogmas that may have surrounded these practices, forget the surrounding institutions that fell into the same traps and corruptions that every large institution falls into. At the core is a felt experience of the sacredness of life and all that is in it. Prayer, meditation, chanting, ritual, yoga, mindfulness in its many forms, these are ways of uncluttering our minds and making space for a deeper connection with self and existence.

Contemporary society favours busy-ness, expression, action, growth, expansion. From the Daoist spiritual tradition we can learn that these are essentially yang or masculine qualities. Nature moves in constant cycles of expansion and contraction, as do our bodies. Contraction, or withdrawal, has been slowly eroded in our lives - hence the whole concept of burnout. The lockdown has forced us into contraction. The virus can be seen as a kind of push-back from nature to restore a vital balance in ourselves and society. The movement inwards, the movement towards stillness and reflection is a yin or feminine movement and requires patience and depth,

rather than speed and productivity. We need to move from routine to re-source, take the time to make contact with an inner state of being, an inner knowing that taps into a larger field of wisdom than our rational minds can access.

According to the media, we are likely to be faced with the mother of all economic recessions in the coming months. A recession, however painful, is also a kind of contraction, a call for reflection, a call to re-imagine our world.

Exterior Systemic Evolution

Sitting in meditation and chatting to strangers outside the supermarket is of course not enough to change the world, though it is a vital and grossly underrated step in the right direction. The world has become a highly complicated network of fragile systems. These systems do not comprise one big organic whole that naturally self-organizes and self-heals like the human body. If we think that the international political or financial system is simply too big to crash, we have our heads deeply buried in the sand.

If we think that someone somewhere, or some group somewhere is holding it all together, we are deluded. Any benevolent conspiracy theory, any malevolent conspiracy theory about some elite group pulling all the strings, are simply ways of abrogating responsibility, of avoiding the problems that face and involve us.

There is plenty we need to cry about. The increasing gap between the richest and the poorest, the continuing oppression of minorities, climate change, the devastation of nature, the list goes on... And there is also much to smile about, all the amazing changes that have emerged from the various crises. The reason that the celebration of our successes is so important is that it gives us hope: we know we can pull it together. Focusing only on the negative, as is very fashionable these days, especially in left-wing media and academia, doesn't make for an inspiring story. I know, I read the Guardian newspaper every day. More or less the whole world has responded to the Corona crisis - many, many people are making huge sacrifices for the common good. There has been a massive amount of mobilization

to combat the crisis.

We have to use this energy, surf this wave of change, and challenge our assumptions as to how we should live, how we should run our businesses, how we should run our politics. Not through blame, which is very much part of the old way of doing things. This is not about shaming and blaming. The culture of blame is antithetical to an evolutionary perspective whereby mistakes are seen primarily as a chance to learn, rather than as a trigger for punishment. Accountability for our actions needs to be evaluated according to our courage in facing the truth and our humility in acknowledging the need to learn.

Who are we as a society if we are not so productive? Who are we as a culture if we cannot be so active and are gently forced into being more contemplative?

Is the aspiration of constant expansion the correct one? Should our economies be built on a win-lose matrix?

Conclusion

Face the facts, don't turn away.

Let ourselves be affected.

Allow vulnerability.

Find the still-point.

***Open our hearts beyond the
usual barriers.***

***Be courageous in questioning
the old.***

Keep what needs to be kept.

Let the new emerge.

Act with love.

Outrageous love.