

Reading Camus in the Time of COVID  
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Almost exactly one year ago, on March 30, 2020, The New Yorker magazine published an article by Jill Lepore, entitled “What Our Contagion Fables Are Really About.” Back then, we had no idea that COVID-19 would be rightly called a plague or that we would be here, on March 28, 2021 still meeting for worship on YouTube and hoping that our recent or anticipated vaccinations will protect us from variants or new viruses. Last year, at this time we were 2 weeks into our virtual worship and were talking naively about being back in our Sanctuary for Easter on April 12. Of course, that didn’t come to pass. Instead, a year of being “Alone, Together” ensued.

Some claim that this pandemic year has been a “great reset” for humanity...I believe we are yet to see whether the humbling lessons we’ve gleaned from the lockdown experience will foster greater lasting goodness and humility or stand in history as a blip, a fleeting shooting star in a dark sky. Humans are remarkably adept at reverting to destructive defaults.

A review of the year surely raises concerns about where we might be headed as a country and planet. And yet, we hope, we carry the flame, we bend towards the light. It is Passover again (the beloved Jewish holiday began last night with a second year of virtual Seders), yet as they say at the end of the much-coveted meal, “Next year, in Jerusalem.” In the holy place of milk and honey.

Lepore begins her article with the astute observation that “in the literature of pestilence, the greatest threat isn’t the loss of human life but the loss of what makes us human.” Any Zombie or Dystopian TV series, movie, or novel can tell us that. Mad Max, The Hunger Games, the Walking Dead, anyone? She notes that “when the plague came to London in 1665, Londoners lost their wits. They consulted astrologers, quacks, the Bible.” (17th century equivalents of injecting bleach, I suppose). “They begged for prophecies, they paid for predictions, they prayed and yowled.” Perhaps, today they would have cut the line for the Moderna vaccine.

In 1722, Daniel Defoe penned two histories of that pandemic in tandem, “A Journal of a Plague Year” and an advice manual called “Due Preparation for the Plague.” Defoe hoped these books would be useful for posterity so, in his words, “we should be spared from that portion of this bitter cup.” Lepore laments that “this bitter cup has come out of the cupboard,” yet again. Apparently, back then, folks protected themselves with practices such as exchanging money by dropping coins in vinegar to sanitize them. “Keep that in mind when you run out of Purell.”

For centuries, plagues ravaged Europe. In Giovanni Boccaccio's 14<sup>th</sup> century work, "Decameron," seven women and three men take turns telling stories for ten days while hiding from the Black Death. Lepore puts it plainly: "The literature of contagion is vile. A plague is like a lobotomy. It cuts away at the higher realms, the loftiest capacities of humanity, and leaves only the animal." That seems a bit severe to me, yet I grasp her point. We have been brought back to a simpler existence, one not entirely within our control.

Lepore moves us through Oedipus Rex, Angels in America, Edgar Allen Poe's "The Masque of Red Death" and Jack London's "Scarlet Plague," then lands on "The Last Man," written in 1826 by Mary Shelley of "Frankenstein" fame. This work, which is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is the first major novel to imagine the extinction of the human race by way of a global pandemic. In the year 2092, the plague arrives and year after year, the pestilence dies away every winter and returns every Spring, more virulent and widespread.

Shelley uses her plague as a metaphor for the descent of humanity, rung by rung, down the ladder it once built. "As the pestilence lays waste to the planet, those who survive are reduced to warring tribes, until only one man, our narrator, is left to shepherd once more." In this year of Trumpism, Q Anon, the insurrection, an uptick in racism and anti-Semitism, 500,000 COVID deaths, violence about transgender individuals, scammers who hoard hand sanitizer, the ongoing climate crisis, mass shootings, and economic injustice, how can we not relate to Shelley's cautionary tale?

And of course, Lepore alights on "The Plague," the classic by writer/philosopher Albert Camus, written in 1947. She reminds us that Camus once defined the plague novel as the place where all human beings abandon all other human beings. However, this is not the case in his own novel. More than any other, it epitomizes Lepore's notion that during pandemics, the greatest threat is the loss of what makes us human, and invariably, there are those who do not succumb to this threat. As pestilence descends on the city and rats die in the street, its citizens must contend (as we have) with not just illness and fear, but with paradoxical ideas of love, isolation and suffering.

Within the walls of the quarantined French-Algerian town of Oran, notices of warning are posted, but in small type and only in obscure places, and the main character, Dr Rieux, laments that "it was hard to find any indication that the authorities were facing the situation squarely." The rich go on living the high life until they are included amongst the infected.

Whoa- that is eerily prescient to the downplaying of the Coronavirus by the Trump administration. Dr. Rieux is the compassionate protagonist of Camus' novel, and he ends up locked in an unwanted asylum. Yet, the people of Oran are saved at the last minute by a serum (also prescient), and the town erupts in joyful celebration. Even so, the Doctor

knows that a plague will rise up again and that the ability to truly share in the suffering of others can be fleeting.

A typical reading of “The Plague” is that it is an allegory about fascism. That is certainly one layer of meaning. However, Camus did not write a book about Nazis and evil. “By writing about an infectious disease, Camus emphasized the relative unimportance to him of the motivation of the evil thing. When he accepted his Nobel Prize, he remarked, “what writer would from now on in good conscience dare set himself up as a preacher of virtue?” What preacher (including myself) would dare do the same?

The essence of Camus’ classic can be found in how the humans of Oran react to their predicament. And the same can be said of us and how we’ve reacted to the COVID pandemic. There is Dr. Rieux, who is devoted to service, there is Tarrou, an observer and incorrigible overthinker, the one who must seek out why. He is constantly chewing over the nature of moral choice and concludes that he will side with the victim.

There is the journalist Rambert, who longs to escape and reunite with his lover. There is the smuggler, Cottard, who profits off other’s misery. And there is Paneloux, the Jesuit priest who takes every contingency, as a sign of God’s will and the plague as a sign of mankind’s depravity. How can we not recognize these characters in the American morality play of coronavirus in 2020?

In his piece for The Los Angeles Times, Stephen Metcalf reminds us that “Camus understood how a universal catastrophe lays a kind of film over humanity, through which the strangest, most unexpected behaviors seep to the surface. Some profiteer and loot, and some express a previously latent capacity for selfless heroism.” Front line and health care workers come to mind. Dr. Rieux offers us one of the simplest but most profound revelations in the novel, when he proclaims: “A loveless world is a dead world.”

Lepore wasn’t the only journalist to pen epic examinations of our existential dilemma. It’s been a veritable cottage industry. In August of 2020, in the Wall Street Journal, Eric Weiner explored how philosophy (“the slow cure” as it’s been called) can help us untangle the knotty ethical questions raised by the pandemic and more personal ones, too, such as how to endure the unendurable. He quips, “we are all philosophers now.”

Weiner asks (with a bit of a poke in the eye): “Are you working on a seemingly fruitless project, a dissertation or a marketing strategy, forever delayed, buffeted by the gales of circumstance? Good, Camus would say, you’ve begun to grasp the absurdity of life. Invest in the effort, not the result and you will sleep better. His prescription is our challenge in this age of COVID-19: staring down the capriciousness of our predicament but stubbornly persisting, rather than yielding to despair. Just like a good philosopher.”

The Israelites who wandered in the wilderness out of Egypt knew a bit about “staring down the capriciousness of our predicament but stubbornly persisting, rather than yielding to despair.” This past week, I heard a Rabbi on NPR commenting on this

pandemic year and a second virtual Seder. Oy vey! He noted that one year was a long time to spend in the wilderness, but he would take it over 40 – a witty reference to the duration Moses and the Israelites wandered until they could enter the Promised Land.

That wilderness wandering is a major aspect of the telling of Passover, or the Haggadah. One of the favorite sections is when the group recites the 10 plagues that befell Egypt until Pharaoh relented and freed the Israelites. As a ritual to accompany this recitation, you allow a droplet of wine to fall from your pinky onto a plate. The traditional plagues are: Blood, frogs, lice, beasts, cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn.

During this anniversary of an actual plague, the recitation of 10 contemporary plagues, something that's been added to modern Seders over time, hold an even deeper significance. They are: hunger, inequity, greed, hatred, silence amid violence and oppression, environmental degradation, stigma of mental illness, lack of hospitality to the stranger or refugees, and powerlessness or taking power from others.

To these we can add, as previously mentioned: Trumpism, Q Anon, the insurrection, an uptick in racism and anti-Semitism, violence about transgender individuals, the climate crisis, mass shootings, economic injustice. These plagues didn't disappear while we sheltered in place and they won't magically be eradicated by Elohim on Mt. Sinai or anywhere else. Our journey towards freedom demands the work of our hearts, our minds, our resources, our voices, and our hands. We can exit this wilderness of the coronavirus to create a world rooted in compassion, authentic connection, and justice. Next year, in Jerusalem.

In the poem by Gayle Brandeis we heard earlier, called "Shedding," she writes: "The virus sheds, and sheds us of illusion, of safety, of vanity, of separateness....The virus sheds, and we shed what doesn't serve us. So we can focus on what matters." What have you shed this past year? Perhaps, the hubris that we can control our fates. Or, distractions that we had endowed with value. Maybe we have shed toxic relationships or habits. Or, grievances that now seem insignificant? And beyond the shedding, how might we experience a re-set that enables us to create anew a beloved community with face-to-face texture and connection?

Writing for "Best Self" just this past week, the Buddhist Claire Jones (we want to cover all the bases here), tells us that "despite our suffering due to COVID-19, we face a unique opportunity to reset our thinking to have a more positive impact as a collective. In this new and bizarre world, we must rise above petty differences and divisions if we hope to be a stronger and more forward-thinking society. In the light of the dire circumstances we face, our laser-like focus should be on the greater good that uplifts and motivates us to adhere to our better, higher selves."

As we heard in Anna Quinn's essay, "Maybe," which Pia shared earlier: "maybe you're not alone in your feelings and maybe you're holding space for someone, or

someone is holding space for you, and maybe the most important things for those of us still here are subversive gestures of tenderness and courage and daring to touch the light.

May we touch the light. May we retain some of the humility foisted upon on this past year, while moving courageously into this season of renewal. May we be healers like Dr. Rieux and truth-tellers like Tarrou. For Rieux, after all, the only means of fighting a plague is through “common decency.”

He also reminds us, through Camus’ humanist lens, that in times of pestilence, humans learn that there “are more things to admire in people than to despise.” May it be so. And may we step lively. For there are beloved yet to embrace anew and many plagues yet to be cured.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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